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# Discovery Of Assam

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## Preface

THIS book is a compilation of the impressions on Assam of some eminent persons of India. In the past, as in the present, perhaps, few persons of distinction visited Assam as frequently as they had done other parts of this sub-continent. All-India gatherings which generally provide opportunities for such men to assemble seldom meet in Assam. The reasons for this perpetual lack of touch of this State with men of thought and letters are many. In the first place, communications to and from Assam with the rest of India have always been awfully bad; the partition of the country in 1947 rendered her position still worse: Assam is today almost sandwiched between a number of foreign countries,—Pakistan, Burma, China and Tibet. Except her tea and oil industries, there are few commercial and trade interests in Assam to attract outsiders. Nevertheless, it is a fact that whosoever had come to Assam, met the people and given thoughts to her history, her culture and her problems were greatly impressed with the unsophisticated life of the Assamese, their hospitality, the picturesque sceneries of the hills and dales, the endless tea-gardens, the luxuriant paddy fields, the colourful tribes and, above all, the heroic part which the people of Assam played in the successive stages of India's freedom struggle.

Since the attainment of Independence, great changes have been taking place in the country and these have generated a new vibration of life. This fact has obviously raised fresh hopes in the minds of the Assamese people including the tribals for an all-round development like the fellow citizens in other parts of India. Apparently the people of Assam do not now feel flattered in calling their State a Cinderella, as a former British Governor of Assam adventitiously used to parade her before others. On the contrary, the people, the tribes

in particular, whose welfare had been criminally neglected by the foreign administration in the past, want to develop to full stature. Recent observers, too, have very rightly shared the view that a great future lies before the people of this frontier State for a variety of reasons. Under the alien rule it was the North-West Frontier areas that monopolized the entire attention of the then Government. The situation has now altered beyond recognition, and Assam of which the North-East Frontier Agency areas form a conspicuous part comprising over thirty thousand square miles in area with a polyglot population of one million in all stages of civilization, has inevitably become not merely a national focus but also international. Indeed, Assam is the only State in India where five countries meet,—countries having different ideologies which bespeak significant turn in world history.

In choosing the articles for this book I have not followed any set principle. Whatever have appeared to be of general interest to those who want to know something about Assam and her people as seen through the eyes of eminent persons have been selected. In that sense, this book may be called a sort of miscellany of Assam's history, culture, traditions, industry and her problems, past and present. True, some of those whose impressions find place in this book are no longer in the midst of the living. Notwithstanding this fact, their views in reference to Assam's problems cannot but have an abiding value, though a few of them have assumed higher proportions having new implications under the changed circumstances. Maybe, some of the problems have been solved, but most of them remain as before, if not more difficult and complicated.

A word about the name of the book seems called for. I have purposely titled it as *Discovery of Assam*. The choice looks somewhat audacious on my part, no doubt; but the idea in having done so is to underline that the eminent persons whose articles I have given in the following pages did discover the real Assam. Therefore it is felt that this book ought to be capable of lifting a

few of the erroneous notions about men and matters pertaining to Assam from that mass of outsiders who have neither seen nor have tried to understand the State in proper perspective. Hence the title *Discovery of Assam*.

In this connection, it will not be irrelevant here to mention a few instances to illustrate what little is known about this frontier State of India. A Northern Indian gentleman who had intended to visit Assam a few years back asked an Assamese friend of his how many mosquito nets he would require during his stay in Assam, for he had heard it said that Assam was a notorious habitat of mosquitoes. A South Indian, writing to a relative in Assam, asked for a present either of a rhinoceros or an elephant as he was told that rhinoceroses, elephants and other species of Assam's fauna outnumber her human population! An Indian Governor of Assam before he was offered the gubernatorial appointment did not know which town was Assam's capital,—Gauhati or Shillong. In the Indian Parliament a member from Assam, not a few years back, expressed relief to find that some of his friends in the House had known that Assam's capital was Shillong, and not Bangkok! The great earthquake of 1950, too, that rocked Upper Assam to the point of annihilation, it seems, has created a feeling that Assam is a land of earthquakes, rains, floods etc. These illustrations reveal by and large how the outside world is informed or rather misinformed about Assam. I sincerely hope that this book will, atleast in a limited way, remove this sort of misinformation or lack of information, and thereby lead many friends and well-wishers of Assam to a real discovery of the State.

I need hardly add that most of the articles that appear in this book had already been published in some form or other. I have reproduced them here with permission where necessary.

Gauhati,

SATIS CHANDRA KAKATI

November 2, 1954.

"THE FUTURE OF ASSAM IS  
FAR FROM GLOOMY."

—Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

**Dedication**

To  
The Memory  
Of  
**LOKAPRIYA GOPINATH BARDOLOI**

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The compiler thanks Sri T. K. Hingorani of Allahabad, the Librarian of the Servants of India Society, Poona, the Editor and Manager of **Harijan**, and Messrs. Padma Publications Limited, Bombay, for their having given permission to reproduce a few articles from their respective publications. He is also greatly indebted to Sri Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Minister, Government of Assam, Sri Radha Govinda Baruah, Proprietor of **The Assam Tribune**, and to Sri P. E. Shanker, a journalist friend, for their kindly suggestions and encouragement.

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*Foreword*

By BISNURAM MEDHI

Through the courtesy of the author I had the pleasure of hastily perusing *Discovery of Assam*. I am glad that the author made a bold attempt in collecting and selecting the articles written by eminent persons narrating and interpreting Assam in their writings and speeches. There are a large number of books written by competent writers, but only a few have appeared about modern Assam, her problems and her future potentialities. The book *Discovery of Assam* does not strictly come under any of these categories. The author also has not the least pretension to place facts for a systematic study pertaining to various problems of the State of Assam. The book is primarily intended for the general readers who want to understand Assam in a somewhat general way with the object of taking an intelligent interest in the affairs of Assam.

The political importance of the State of Assam and its development have come to the forefront for a variety of reasons, and the author has tried to narrate the facts relating to Assam in a handy form, so that the readers may have a proper perspective. Assam no doubt is popularly described as a Problem State and she draws sympathy throughout India towards her speedy development.

To the anthropologists Assam offers a vast field for study with so many peoples living together within its border in different stages of growth and process of assimilation.

It is still within the memory of the present generation that the Bodo Kacharis, the Koches and the Ahoms exercised sovereignty in Assam at different times under different names before the British. In those days the people of the hill areas used to come down and carry on trade by establishing contact with the plains people, and friendly relation was always maintained with them. One important factor should always be borne in mind that Assam is the meeting place of the Indo-Mongloid and Indo-Aryan people in India. It is a fact that Assam was ruled for a long time by the Indo-Mongloid or Mongloid people most of whom are known today as plains tribals and that, as a result of a long contact of the Mongloid people with the Indo-Aryans, there grew up a peculiar blended culture and civilization in Assam which was adopted by the tribal people in the plains. Since then a process of mutual assimilation was being maintained here in Assam between the plains tribal people and other non-tribal indigenous Assamese people. Besides the plains tribals, there are a large number of Garos, Mikirs, Rabhas, Miris, Lalungs and other hill tribals who are already settled in the plains portion of Assam permanently serving as a link between the people living in the plains and the hills.

Past history indicates a continuous attempt to harness the co-operation of the tribals in all enterprises whether of war or of peace or of economic development of the country.

The tribals have freely adopted whatever they have found good in our way of life, our language and culture. In the same way we have adopted many of their customs, institutions and practices. The Assamese people are composed of tribals and non-tribals; and the Assamese language is a composite structure of words borrowed from Sanskrit, Persian and tribal languages. Even the dress of the Assamese, their customs and amusements represent a mixture of tribal and non-tribal elements. Nearly thirty per cent of the words in the

Assamese language are of the Austric origin, a family to which the Garos, Khasis, Nagas, Kacharis, etc., belong. The Kacharis, Miris, Mikirs, Lalungs, Rabhas and other tribals numbering about seven lakhs live in the plains in the closest friendship with the rest of the population. Even the Nagas were living in perfect harmony with the people of the plains as will appear from the following quotation from Robinson, the author of the *Descriptive Account of Assam* (one of the earliest records in English):

"The circumstances of the Assam Government having always raised a revenue from the imported salt of the hills, and the dependence of the Nagas on the Assam markets for the exchange of salt for grain or other articles, has contributed to a mutual good understanding between the two peoples. The Naga Hills have in consequence been always accessible to the people of the plains; whilst the Nagas have on their part been always permitted access to the markets on the frontier".

In the Naga Hills, there are 8 or 9 different sub-tribes speaking different dialects, and one sub-tribe cannot understand the dialect of the other sub-tribe. The Assamese language serves as a *lingua franca* in the entire autonomous Naga Hills and the people living therein exchange their ideas through the irregularly spoken Assamese language or broken Assamese language adopted by them. Coming to the period of the Ahom administration of which we possess ample contemporaneous records we find that the tribals were assimilated more closely by ties of marriage and common citizenship.

Similar contacts were established by the Assamese with the Khasis, Garos, Bhutias, Daflas, Abors, Mishmis etc and maintained until introduction of the British rule when the neglect of the British separated the tribal people from their brothers in the plains. Nothing was done to improve communications and even the old established trade routes were allowed to deteriorate through lack of repairs and disuse.

There is no denying the fact that a certain measure of suspicion does exist in some areas but the reason for

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

it is to be found in the policy of the British which, as already stated, was to keep the Tribal areas as closed preserves for themselves. History records many instances of friendly and mutually helpful contacts between the tribal people and the people of the Brahmaputra valley during the days of the Ahom rule. Trade relations have existed between the tribal and plains people for a very long time. Any theory of tension between the two groups of people, based on grounds of race or place of habitation, is therefore wrong and fallacious. As contacts on the social, economic and political planes between the people of the hills and the people of the plains develop and they begin to understand and appreciate more of each other's customs, traditions and culture as in the old days, the present tensions and suspicions are sure to vanish. With the advent of Independence the barrier is already cracking, and the suspicion and tension are gradually disappearing.

The historical background, particularly relating to the period beyond the British rule, seems essential for a correct appreciation of the relationship between the peoples living in the plains and the hills and also for correct guidance for solution of the problems and the measures for the development of the various tribes living in the State.

The State is no less important to those who want to study its geography. Its big rivers like the Brahmaputra, the Dibang, the Dihing, the Lohit, the Kopili and the Pagladia, some of them being really 'rivers of sorrow,' cause inundation and damage to crops over extensive areas in the plains.

Assam also may provide interesting studies to seismologists as a number of great earthquakes have shaken her on different times.

Assam is also a fertile field of investigation to geophysicists and geologists for the rich mineral resources like coal, oil, lime-stone and sillimanite etc lying hidden

## FOREWORD

all over the State extending from Garo Hills to the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri.

It is known to all that there are a large number of *Satras* and monasteries spread throughout the State of Assam gloriously telling the influence of Vaishnavism under the leadership of Sri Sri Sankardev. The *Shakti* cult, the embodiment of which stands so majestically at Nilachal, known as the Mother Kamakshya, is also standing here in Assam.

In *Discovery of Assam* the author has given an idea of the interest taken and shown by the builders of new India in the affairs of Assam and in the solution of her problems. It is hoped that this volume will prove useful to all, particularly to the young generation of Assam on whom depends the future of the State.

Shillong.  
May 20, 1954

## CHAPTER I

### MAHATMA GANDHI

**M**AHATMA GANDHI visited Assam on four occasions. His first visit was in the year 1921 in connection with the Non-co-operation movement. That was a historic year in India's modern history when he called upon his countrymen and women to fight for independence through the cult of non-violence and truth. During his sojourn in Assam Gandhiji was accompanied by late Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Azad Sobhani. He stayed at the Gauhati residence of late Desabhakta Tarun Ram Phookun who was, at that time, Gandhiji's virtual lieutenant in this part of the country and the unique leader of the non-cooperation movement in Assam. He addressed, at Gauhati, a crowd of over 10,000 people, the largest ever seen in a public meeting in Assam till then. A bonfire of foreign cloth, collected from all over Assam was staged before Gandhiji's presence to signalize the State's resolve to boycott foreign goods. Gandhiji toured the State of Assam extensively, meeting, among others, European tea-planters. His message of Truth and Non-violence and call to the people to join in the first phase of the freedom struggle received spontaneous response from the people of Assam. This impressed Gandhiji immensely.

Gandhiji's impressions of his first visit to Assam was given in the pages of *Young India* under captions

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

'Lovely Assam', 'The conditions in Assam' and 'Officiousness' These are reproduced in the pages that follow. Though Gandhiji's views were recorded as early as in 1921 they are nevertheless a source of joy and pride to the men and women of Assam whose hearts Gandhiji had so largely won. It is believed that chroniclers of the freedom struggle will consider these impressions as the best compliment which the Father of the Nation could bestow upon the people.

His second visit took place in 1926. The occasion was provided by the holding of the twenty-sixth session of the Congress—the only session of the Congress ever held in Assam. It met at Pandu, near Gauhati, under the presidency of late S. Srinivasa Iyenger. Gandhiji put up in a small hut, a few yards from the mighty Brahmaputra. Gandhiji opened the Exhibition. The Congress session unfortunately met under the spell of a profound sorrow on account of the assassination of Swami Sraddhananda. Gandhiji left the session the next day.

In 1934, Gandhiji came to Assam for the third time. This visit was exclusively for Harijan work: to study their conditions at first hand in Assam and to raise a fund for their uplift work. A Harijan leader of Assam told Gandhiji at Gauhati: "The untouchability in Assam is much less than in other parts of the country, e.g. in respect of water, temple entry, touch of caste Hindus etc".

To this Gandhiji replied: "I said, on entering the threshold of Assam, that you were on a wrong track. No matter what the degree of untouchability; so long as there is untouchability you will feel like the unseen and unseeable of Malabar, because you will know where the shoe pinches. The feeling will be the same.....".

Gandhiji's fourth and, sadly the last, visit to Assam was in 1946. On the occasion he could not go round the State as on the three previous ones owing to his old age; nevertheless all roads led to the Sarania

## GANDHI

Ashram (Gauhati) where he stayed in a small hut and gave *darsan* to multitudinous people. He undertook a steamer trip to Sualkuchi, the home of Assam's silk industry. His purpose was apparently to see for himself the silk-weavers about whom he had spoken so warmly on different occasions.

Obviously, Mahatmaji's visits to Assam were few and far between. All the same, Assam was dear to him. In times of distress and calamity, it was he who toned up the morale of the people here as elsewhere; it was he again who watched and helped in shaping the destiny of Assam. During the second World War when Assam turned into one of the principal operational bases, Gandhiji, (he was at that time detained in the Aga Khan Palace), sent messages to the Assam people as to how the people, including womenfolk, should resist the state of rape, debauchery, murder, molestation and all the vices which gushed out of war conditions, regardless of whichever quarters perpetrated them on the innocent people. The last but the most important message, Gandhiji gave to Assam was the one during the controversy over the Grouping Clause contained in the British Cabinet Mission Plan. Gandhiji wrote: "If the people of Assam are men, and not manikins, they should not accept it (the Grouping Clause)". And the course of events that followed is too well-known to need recapitulation.

How devoutly Assam responded to the call of Gandhiji through all stages of the freedom struggle is illustrated by a remark of the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten made at a public meeting at Gauhati in 1947. Lord Mountbatten said: "Assam is one of the provinces where Gandhiji's ideals are followed." ]

## LOVELY ASSAM

BY MAHATMA GANDHI

I am writing these notes at Tezpur on the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra. Tezpur was known as Shonitapur and is reputed to have been the capital of the demon, Banasur, whose daughter, Usha, was married to Aniruddha. Devotees can point out the place where Hari and Hara fought. Assam is a land of magnificent vegetation. Some of the river scenery are hard to beat throughout the world. I have seen the gorgeous scenery on the Thames. But I cannot recall anything as superior to the lavishness with which nature has decorated the great stream on whose banks I am writing these notes.

Upper Assam alone has a population of over 37 lacs. Every woman of Assam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. And she weaves fairy tales in cloth. Some of the old pattern that our host, Mr. Phookun, showed me were of matchless beauty. And as I saw these beautiful patterns, I could not help shedding a silent tear over India's past glory and her lost art. Where is to be found in all the fine rich foreign *sadis* in India that beautiful blending of soft colours so pleasing to the eye? The vegetable dyes of Assam are almost extinct. When Assam became a British possession, its women ceased to spin and sinfully took to weaving foreign yarn. And now, what the women of Assam are saving

through weaving, they are losing through buying foreign yarn. And the *sadis* I see to-day are not anything to be compared to the old patterns I have seen for beauty and softness. Assam, if its workers do their duty, can play a most important part in developing Swadeshi. Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves. Forty thousand acres are under cotton cultivation to-day, an acre yielding on an average 133lbs. But, of course, Assam can grow much more. Some of the cotton I saw was very beautiful and long-staple. And fine spinning is still in existence, in isolated homes as in Andhra. Every one admits that the Assamese have ample time at their disposal. I have elsewhere reproduced an extract from an English writer's observation confirming the view. Assam has plenty of wood, sound and durable, just the kind for making spinning-wheels. Let us hope that Assam will rise to its full height in the matter of Swadeshi.

The Assamese are cursed with the opium habit, but the movement against the vice has spread throughout the length and breadth of India. I am told that many people have given up the habit altogether and that abstinence is on the increase.

I understand that some Government officials have made use of a slip I have committed in my booklet, 'Hind Swaraj' in which I have bracketed the Assamese with the Pindarees and other wild tribes. I have made ample amends to the people. It was certainly on my part a grave injustice done to the great Assamese people who are every whit as civilized as any other parts of India. They have a fine literature, some of which is written on bark of *agaru* tree with beautifully coloured illustrations said to be very old. And, of course, I fell in love with the women of Assam as soon as I learnt that they were accomplished weavers. Being weavers, they have used economy in their dress without impairing its beauty or its efficiency as cover. And to me it

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

is a sign of very high culture to see the Assamese women and girls wearing little or no jewellery. They are like women all over India naturally, shy and modest with extremely refined and open faces.

My stupidity about the Assamese rose, when about 1890 I read an account of the Manipur expedition when the late Sir John Gorst defended the conduct of the officials towards the late Senapati, saying that Governments always liked to lop off tall poppies. Being an indifferent reader of history, I retained with me the impression that the Assamese were *jangali* and committed it to writing in 1908. However my slip has afforded consolation to some officials, amusement to my audience before which I corrected the slip, and a splendid opportunity to me of paying a tribute to the simple and natural beauty of the Assamese sisters and of enlisting them on the side of India and Swadeshi.

I must not omit to mention the fact that out of nearly seventy-eight Assamese pleaders, fifteen have suspended practice, probably the highest percentage throughout India.

Lastly, I must congratulate the Congress Committee on the excellent order preserved at all the meetings. All rush and noise have been avoided with wonderful discipline.\*

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\* From *Young India*, 1921.

## CONDITIONS IN ASSAM

BY MAHATMA GANDHI

For these few days past I have been in lower Assam in the Surma Valley at Sylhet in the midst of indescribable beauty of sky and earth. The perfect green verdure which is everywhere present in such profusion is soothing to the eye, and there is a peace about this ancient town which is equally quieting to the soul. We are away from the rush and noise of Calcutta, yet life here is full of intellectual activity and love of natural beauty, while the impression is still fresh upon my mind, I wish to tell readers of *Young India* something about this distant corner of the motherland. First of all, the population in this lower valley is almost entirely Bengali. The opium habits which were allowed to continue under British administration for nearly a century have driven the Assamese race which was once so strong and noble into the interior. Unless this terrible opium curse is removed, the Assamese race is doomed to extinction. Other races will enter and occupy these valleys, just as they have done here in Sylhet.

The students with whom I have been living during this week are full of youthful patriotism and devotion. They have very deeply implanted to them the love of social service and they quickly responded to my message of the service of the poor.

Home life, as far as I have been able to judge, has remained very little tainted by false western habits. The home industries are still flourishing in this valley and there is a good prospect for spinning and weaving

in the future, since Nature herself is bountiful and the pressure of population is not felt severely. There is none of that strain of suffering upon the faces of the villagers which is so common in Bengal. The only scourge has been malaria, and it would appear that this could be prevented by careful drainage according to Watson's method. Two things have much impressed me. The first has been the comradeship between the teachers and the students. The teachers are like elder brothers. The second is the complete friendliness between Hindus and Mussalmans. Since my arrival I have not seen one sign of Hindu-Muslim hostility. In every gathering Hindus and Mussalmans are equally represented. Among the youngmen of Sylhet District, physical exercises are valued. Swimming has become a national pastime. The health that this has given them is apparent in the brightness of the faces of the students.

I should mention in conclusion that already I have started investigating the condition of the tea garden labourer, but as the inquiry has only just begun, it will not be possible to say anything yet about it.

This is the second week I have spent in Assam and every day I am realizing afresh the beauty of these valleys coming direct from Bengal where every foot of ground is occupied by tillage. I am amazed to see the vast areas of fertile but unoccupied land. The earlier condition of the tea garden labourers was indeed deplorable but one blessing has followed. Many hundreds of thousands have settled down in villages of their own with independent rights as villagers, and their children look wonderfully healthy. Those who have come from the other provinces as tea garden labourers are nearly all Hindus. They appear to assimilate themselves easily to the climate and life of Assam and to be on terms of friendship with the Assamese who are a most hospitable people. The health of the Brahmaputra Valley has improved. Malaria swamps have been drained and jungles have been cleaned away. The one curse here is opium.

I have seen the shrivelled and debased opinion addicts and can understand the vast misery and calamity involved. Another immigration is spreading into this Valley from the Mymensingh district of East Bengal. These people are all Mussalman agriculturists, hardy and thrifty. They rapidly occupy the low-lying paddy land which has been left vacant by the Assamese race. They are industrious and abstemious in character.

A great Vaishnava revival under Shankar Dev in the sixteenth century has made the Assamese people kindly, tolerant and humane. There is no sign anywhere of that form of untouchability which is to be found in Southern India, though there are many social wrongs which ought to be done away with. Home-weaving is still carried on and it is somewhat rare to see Assamese dressed up in European clothes. The women of Assam have maintained the home industries and it is expected of every bride that they should be able to spin. The tea garden labourers are still engaging my most earnest attention, but the time has not yet come to write about them fully.\*

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\* From *Young India*, 1922.

## OFFICIOUSNESS

### OFFICIOUSNESS

By MAHATMA GANDHI

The officials in Assam are evidently unused to large demonstrations and gatherings. They have forbidden to the demonstrators the use of public grounds. The Nowgong officials however positively irritated the people. The Deputy Commissioner would not allow a little platform with a canopy to be erected on the football ground and, after having allowed its use, had it dismantled because, he said, the chairman of the committee was guilty of a breach of faith in that he had erected the platform. The committee in disgust held the meeting on private ground. Nor was this all. The Deputy Commissioner endeavoured to control attendance at the railway station and wanted the names of the chosen few who were to go to the platform. He would not allow any procession for fear of disturbance. As a matter of fact, the crowds have been nowhere so restrained or well-behaved as in Assam, even in the demonstration of their affection. And any experienced official could have seen that affectionate demonstrations, no matter how noisy, could not possibly end in trouble or mischief. But Assam is a place where, I understand, officials will not tolerate any awakening among the people. Only the other day, at Tezpur, an official summarily and forcibly had certain quarters evacuated by the residents, because their buffaloes interfered with his sport. Another official during the war-period carried fire and sword among a little border tribe called Kukis, and slaughtered them like goats, sparing neither women

nor children. I understand that the whole of this shameful massacre was suppressed from the public, though it is common knowledge among the people. No wonder that in Assam things have been carried so far, that its permanent capital is 4,000 feet above the sea-level. It has no capital on the plains at all. Shillong is, I am told, to all intents and purposes a European settlement. And the Government never descends from its inaccessible heights. \*

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\*From *Young India*, 1922.

## CHAPTER II

## REV. C. F. ANDREWS

[In the early twenties the name of Reverend C. F. Andrews became too familiar with all sections of Assam's population, as throughout India,—students, peasants, weavers and opium-addicts. Even now, his name is held in grateful remembrance. Gandhi, Tagore and Andrews were a sort of triumvirate in India in those days: they were so devoted to each other!]

Rev. Andrews, better known as 'Deenabandhu' to millions of his admirers, came to Assam, for the first time, in 1923 to preside over the Assam Students Conference, an organization in whose womb were then budding the administrators and leaders of the present-day Assam. It would not be irrelevant to recall that Deenabandhu's visit to Nowgong, the venue of the conference, was a great attraction. He was clad in Indian dress. To many it was something of a revolution to see an Englishman attired in Khaddar *Dhuti* and shirt in the hectic days of the post-non-co-operation movement.

His second visit was in May, 1924, in connection with the Opium Inquiry Committee set up by the All-India Congress Committee. The object was to make a full investigation into the wide prevalence of the opium evil in Assam, and to present a report before the Geneva International Opium Conference held in November the

next year. The Committee consisted of Sri Kuladhar Chaliha, the late Sri Tarun Ram Phookun, the late Sri Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, the late Sri Krishnanath Sarma, late Sri Rohini Kumar Hatibarua, Sri Ambikagiri Raichoudhury and Sri Omeokumar Das. But its great strength lay in the assistance of Rev. Andrews who most ably placed the case of Assam against this evil at the Geneva Convention. Deenabandhu was thus one of those who first raised the war-cry against the evil of opium. (Believe it or not, in five districts alone of Assam,—the blackest spot in the world's opium map,—a colossal total of 1,639 maunds 28 srs. of opium was consumed in 1919-20! If you work it out at per capita basis, you would find, to your amazement, that 10,000 souls of Assam's population used to consume annually 261.5 srs. in 1919-20. In other words, each Assamese, on the average, paid a revenue of Rs. 1-6-5 pies to the alien Government who boosted up the opium habit.)

Today the time has changed and, like all other evils, the use of opium is restricted, by law, to medicinal purpose only. But the credit as one of the pioneers in this humanitarian work goes to Deenabandhu in no small measure.]

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## KHADDAR IN ASSAM

### KHADDAR IN ASSAM

By C. F. ANDREWS

Since I came to Assam I have noticed among the ladies whom I have met in every place in order to speak to them about the evil effect of opium in their country, that almost without exception they were clothed from head to foot in Khaddar. This was not put on for the occasion but was the custom of everyday life. When I came to inquire into the causes of this I found out that a very beautiful custom existed. In certain sections of the community no bride could be married except in cloth which had been woven by her own hand. In Assam, fortunately, the marriageable age is higher than in many other parts of India; and, therefore, this custom has been observed even up to the present day. When I have seen the delicate and artistic borders, it has given me the greatest joy, and also a new revelation of the beauty of Khaddar as a work of fine art. It has further been impressed on me, many times over, that if this one good custom could gradually spread to the other provinces of India—at least among Congress households,—it would be a glorious achievement. It would rescue, for one thing, the noble art of weaving from the neglect into which it has fallen, so that today a ‘weaver’ is often supposed to be low to a ‘low caste’ profession. In reading through the records of the early days, last century, in Assam, I came across this passage about Lakhimpur, quoted from Mr. Moffat Mill’s Report of 1853:

“Thus every family has its loom for weaving, and its implements for cleaning and spinning cotton thread and silk. From the return of imports, it would appear

that the quantity of piece goods imported would not furnish a rag to each individual well-clad. They are their own weavers, their own rope-makers, their own tailors, their own carpenters and, if a man is a cunning worker in ivory or precious metals, or in iron or pottery, he and his family perform between them all the other arts besides.”

I am afraid that Lakhimpur cannot pretend to such a character of home industry today. The vast immigration of the tea garden labour has changed the face of the country, and I have seen very little Khaddar indeed among the labourers. Yet the spare time that hangs heavily on their hands is very great; for their work is often finished early in the day. Spinning, at least, should be easy in their households. As matters stand, the proverb is only too correct that “Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do”. For their days of idleness, both men and women drink to excess; and when I called on a Sunday at a tea estate, the manager said to me: “I am afraid you will find drunkenness everywhere today. It is Sunday, and also there are three marriages.”

It is certainly true that one of the greatest aids towards the cure of intemperance would be the spread of hand-spinning and hand-weaving.\*

\*From *Young India* dated June 11, 1925.

## THE PEOPLE OF ASSAM

### THE PEOPLE OF ASSAM

By C. F. ANDREWS

Before leaving Assam after one month's residence in this beautiful country, I would wish to pay my tribute of reverence and affection to its people in the columns of *Young India*. Especially the mothers and sisters of Assam whom I have met in every place have won my reverence by their deep patriotism and true sincerity of perfect womenhood, shown in unselfish labour and devotion. Nowhere else in the whole of India, I believe, can such industry be found in weaving home-made cloth as in Assam; for the custom among women is almost universal. Though spinning has partly died out (nevertheless it is being quickly revived), weaving has held its proper place, and it has preserved the true Hindu ideal of the home-life here in Hindu India; for Assam proper is ninety per cent Hindu, and the Vaishnava Hindu traditions have made the country what it is. The Hindu widow there is honoured and respected and revered for her devotion and sacrifice. She weaves the cloth for the family and teaches the little children round her who are just like her own children, to spin and weave. She holds her true place of dignity, because she is an active bread-winner and bread-earner, with an independent occupation. The wife, and mother also, in these Assamese households, is truly with her husband the twin pillar of the family. The Mussalman families are wonderfully united in friendship with the Hindu families and, in a great many ways, they share their peaceful and gentle ideals.

While I have given the first place of honour in my thoughts to the mothers and sisters whom I have met in Assam, I have also been greatly impressed by the practical capacity of the men and by their love of their own country and readiness for social service. The children have practical ways; in the future, as the knowledge of the world outside Assam is gained, they should make remarkable citizens and patriots, inspired with love for India, the motherland, and humanity.

There is a terrible weakness among the village people owing to a whole century of the ingrained debasing opium habit which has produced listless indolence. But, with the removal of the opium curse, this weakness ought to vanish; and the strong independence of the Assamese race which was so evident in earlier days ought to assert itself once more.\*

\*From *Young India* dated June 25, 1925.

### LOOK AFTER THE BORDER

as ever, far from satisfactory. In the course of his speeches at Gauhati and Shillong,—the two places he visited in his second and last visit, the Sardar told the Army stationed in Assam and the people: 'Look after the border'. And, about the money required for building up a new Assam, Vallabhbhai Patel assured that he would either 'beg or borrow' for Assam, and he asked the people to go ahead.]

## CHAPTER III VALLABHBHAI PATEL

(Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, popularly known as India's 'Iron Man', visited Assam on two occasions. He came, first, to attend the fortyfirst session of the Indian National Congress held at Pandu, near Gauhati in 1926. At that time he merely belonged to the rank and file of the Congress. Latterly, however, as events unfolded, the Sardar became the most dominant figure in Indian politics which position he retained till his death in 1950. Firm in action, outspoken in utterance and realistic in approach to problems, Vallabhbhai Patel occupied a place in the Congress organization next to Mahatma Gandhi, though it is not to say that the Sardar of Bordoli was next also in popularity, or power of intellect or breath of vision. Far from it. His personal popularity was but a fraction of Sri Nehru's; in intellect, he was miles behind Rajaji; and in respect of vision, it is doubtful if he had heard of such a thing at all. All the same he was the most ruthless leader among the Congressmen. The Sardar was acclaimed as the consolidator of a new India, shorn of all the centrifugal forces, including over 600 Indian States, bequeathed by the British rule.

The second visit of the Sardar to Assam took place in January 1948. He came in the capacity of the Deputy Prime Minister of India. The time was rather abnormal. The pangs of the partition were not yet healed. Assam was particularly suffering from its severe impact; her communications were at a standstill, and her finance was,

## LOOK AFTER THE BORDER

### LOOK AFTER THE BORDER

By SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL

I desired to see for myself after 22 years the progress which Assam had made during this period. More particularly I wanted to see how Assam had been affected by recent events including the separation of a part of Sylhet. India has had to shoulder a great burden; this has involved suffering and privation. It has also filled all of us with deep sorrow. During the struggle for freedom although we had borne tremendous sufferings we had never flinched or grieved because the very struggle contained zest and keenness which conquered half-heartedness and sorrow. We thus won Freedom but, if we had not suddenly turned mad, we would have started reaping its fruit and enhancing our prestige and reputation in the eyes of the world. Instead of appreciating the value of what we had achieved, we behaved worse than animals. It was in no light-hearted manner that we agreed to partition. This price was necessary to gain freedom and to live in freedom. However, there is no time now for grieving over what has happened. We must now forget what we have suffered. We must remember that we have still our brethren across the frontier whom we have to evacuate and settle in this country. We hope Pakistan will not give us any trouble; instead it will assist us in that task so that we may accomplish it peacefully and successfully in order that each of us may settle down to the vital task of reconstruction which awaits us. Thereafter there would be no bone of contention.

In this connection, I appreciate that Kashmir and Hyderabad are still the two problems which remain out-

standing. Though contrary to what Pakistan contends; Junagadh has ceased to be a problem. Of these two problems, Hyderabad, I am certain, would itself realize the path of wisdom and sanity. But if it did not, the problem would not remain confined to Hyderabad alone, but would have wide repercussions. There are four and a half crores of Muslims in the rest of India who are bound to be affected if Hyderabad releases what will, in effect, be a cloud of poisoned atmosphere.

As regards Kashmir, I am definite that the problem will settle itself sooner than many expected but if it persists, while it may damage India to some extent, it will finish Pakistan. India intends to wish Pakistan well. All the problems incidental to partition have been amicably settled. Surely, that is not like enemies but like mutual well-wishers. If only the problem of evacuation and exchange of population had been settled successfully and satisfactorily, relations between India and Pakistan would have been much better.

Words cannot describe the horror of sufferings which the Punjabis have suffered. The rehabilitation of refugees is a very difficult task and in that task I invite the co-operation of every citizen of every province. There is no room here for provincial parochialism or for inter-provincial jealousies. If such tendencies develop, it would mean the ruin of India. Instead there must be rivalries in advancement and prosperity. I, therefore, thank the people of Shillong for the purse of Rs. 10,000 which has been presented for the relief of the refugees. What matters so much is not the contribution but the spirit behind it.

I recall how only six months ago there was a general talk of a Rajasthan which, if it had materialized, would have meant that the whole body politic of India would have been covered with ulcers. Instead we have achieved integration and unity which have promised immense potentialities for glory and greatness. It is now

for all of you either to mend or mar your future. If you want to secure your future you could do so only by unity in which lies strength.

I am happy that the people of Assam have forgotten and forgiven the efforts which the Muslim population made for the achievement of Pakistan. I hope that this good turn will be taken up and you will achieve unity. This obviously means that if there is a struggle with Pakistan, Muslims in India must stand by their country. They must tell Pakistanis : "You have got what you wanted. For heaven's sake, let us now live in peace".

I have a special word for the young men whom I see around me. I know that many of you wished to sponsor socialism but you must realize that unity should come first. It is no use merely crying : "We are Socialists". You cannot comprehend Socialism by reading text-books or listening to learned speeches. You must first understand what it means in practice and how the ground has to be prepared for it. You must realize how long England took to become socialistic, and America does not even talk of it now. They say I am a friend of the Rulers and the capitalists; but I am a friend of the Harijans, the poor and the tribes. I am also a friend of the Socialists. Unlike many who indulge in the parrot cry of socialism I have no property of my own. Before you talk of socialism, you must ask yourself how much wealth you have created by your own labour. If you have created nothing the parrot would have flown and the cage would be empty. By experience, I am convinced that what is necessary is for us to learn how to produce wealth and then to produce and thereafter to think what to do with it. What the province wants most is not this parrot cry of socialism but unity and strength. Yours is a land for gods to live in. Its air, its natural scenery, its pure atmosphere, its sweet water would attract even gods if our hearts were pure, but the population was lazy and it did not know how to make the

best of resources. You must first, therefore, get rid of your enemy which is laziness. There is so much to be done. If you produce your own cloth and your own food, and abstain from drinks, you can change the entire rural atmosphere. You have then to harness your rivers. You have established a High Court and a University. You must concentrate on this useful and constructive work and not lose yourselves in theoretical disputes about socialism. Some people feel that they can settle all problems by wielding the big stick and by reciting *ad nauseam* the elementary ideas about socialism. They forget that it is not coercion or hatred but affection and regard which would prove most effective. That is the divine way of doing things. You have also to look after the border of which you are the gate-keepers. It is a big responsibility, for it involves dealing with the enemies and welcoming friends. The natural sceneries are an asset to your province. There may not be the wealth of the cities but they have beauty and naturalness. Although I am going to Calcutta, a bigger place and would stay in a bigger Government House, I would miss the simplicity and natural life that I have come across in Shillong. I am sure I shall not see anything like it.

I ask you to make full use of your Prime Minister,\* a self-sacrificing man of ability and truly competent; and your Governor\*\* who has been specially selected for you, and who is working for you. His experience of men and affairs is unrivalled.

I wish you create in Assam a model for the rest of India. I hope, during the coming few years, I can see something of what you accomplish to this end. In your achievements I shall find the noblest gesture that could ever be the luck of any individual to receive.\*\*\*

\* Late Sri Gopinath Bardoloi.

\*\* Late Sir Akbar Hydari.

\*\*\* Speech delivered at a public meeting at Shillong on January 2, 1948.

## CHAPTER IV

### TARUN RAM PHOOKUN

[ During the years 1921-34, two personalities dominated the political life of Assam : Tarun Ram Phookun and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi. In fact, these two leaders were responsible for the ferment in this part of the country generated by Mahatma Gandhi's clarion call to the people to free the motherland from the bondage of an alien rule. The names of Tarun Ram Phookun and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi became too familiar with the people of Assam; even a school boy seldom missed to know their names. Latterly they were known as *Deshabhakta* and *Karmavir* respectively meaning 'patriot' and 'hero among workers'. Indeed these two leaders were so close and intimate that it was, and still is, difficult to remember the one without remembering the other. Tarun Ram Phookun and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi were more than a brother to each other besides being comrades-in-arms. Much of what had shaped Assam's destiny during those hectic days of national movement *pari passu* constitutional progress under the various Reforms preceding the attainment of India's Independence were the efforts of these twin political luminaries of Assam, Deshabhakta Phookun and Karmavir Bardoloi ].

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### WELCOME

#### BY TARUN RAM PHOOKUN

As I stand before you to offer our welcome a sense of overwhelming loss overtakes me and I can scarcely give expression to what is uppermost in the minds of all and every one of us. Deshabandhu Chitta Ranjan Das is not with us to-day. He laid down his life for his country. He needed rest and God in His eternal mercy granted him that, although the country had need of him. I doubt not that he will be gratefully remembered now and for ever by a nation whose honour and dignity he tried to maintain at the cost of his life.

It is with much pleasure that I, on behalf of the members of the Reception Committee and of the people of Assam generally, welcome you to the labours of the 41st Indian National Congress at Gauhati. I am not worthy of the great privilege of receiving you, so kindly conferred upon me, but my excuse in accepting it is that I have taken it as a command from my people which I am bound to obey.

While inviting you to our poor province, situated at the easternmost corner of India, we were fully alive to the fact that we will be putting you to a series of serious inconveniences. We did really foresee the difficulty of a small provincial town like Gauhati consisting of a population of 16,000 souls only, having to accord proper reception to you. We also fully realized that all our best endeavour could not go far enough to give you the least in the name of comforts. But I hope you will forgive our failings when you take into account our

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

people's earnest desire to be in actual touch with this mighty institution. Have we not therefore fair reason to believe that your kindness and sympathy for a sister province will soon make you forget all the troubles taken out of love, and forgive us for those given in our earnest desire to serve you ?

Fairly rich in her natural resources, she is undoubtedly magnificently rich in her natural grandeur. Maybe, it is due to my natural pride as an Assamese, but I feel that Assam with the lofty mountains standing along the North, with plains encircled by the high ranges—such as, of Bhutan, Khasia—Jaintia, Naga and the Garo hills, watered by the crystal currents of thousands of hill streams and, with the mighty Brahmaputra majestically flowing through her heart, Assam will stand comparison with the most beautiful country in the world.

It was not without reason that reference was made in the *Joginitantra* of Kamrup as the place where gods even desired to die, not to speak of human beings.

The place where we have assembled today is sacred with thousand memories of India's past glories, memories of culture, of heroic deeds, of scientific achievements, of great happenings cherished in tradition and chronicled in history. The younger hillock on the Brahmaputra enshrines a temple of *Siva*, known as *Pandu Nath* which was founded by the Pandavas during their exile. There is the *Nilachala* (the blue mountain) wherein stands the famous temple of Kamakshya Devi. For centuries Kamakshya in Kamrupa has been the meeting place of devout pilgrims from all parts of India.

Ladies and gentlemen, it was in this holy land of Kamarupa that Narakasur of *Pouranic* fame reigned supreme. It was Raja Bhagadutta of Kamrupa who went with 10,000 elephants to the holy battle field of Kurukshetra and gallantly fought for the Kauravas with soldiers from Assam which came up to 1/18th of the entire *Kuru-sena*. It was in this holy land Kamrupa that *Rishis*

*Munies*, such as Vasista, Galava, Sukracharya, Kasyapa and others found suitable places for their meditations. Ancient Kamrupa which lay extended up to Karatoya Samakirna Yabat Dikkar Basini including Cooch Behar and Rangpur was at one time the seat of Indian culture. Kumar Vaskar Varma of Kamrupa, escorted by Hiuen Tsang, led the historic deputation to the Court of Emperor Siladitta II known as Harsa Vardhana.

It was here in 1668 A. D. that the great Assamese General, Lachit Bar Phookun, defeated the most powerful army of the Emperor Aurangazeb and stemmed for ever the tide of Moghul conquest. It was here that Assamese people fought their Thermopalaes and drove back the Moghuls from their homeland. In the conquering career of the mighty Emperor it was only at Saraighat—not far away from this pandal,—that his formidable army had a crushing defeat. And again it was here that the great Assamese King Rudra Singha collected his vast army numbering over six lacs to conquer back from Gour the territories upto the river Karatoya which formed the traditional boundary between the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa and the world west of it. And yet again it was about 6 miles from here that Bakhtiar Khilji, the conqueror of Bengal, was defeated and turned back in 1204 A. D. by the most powerful King Kamata. Three miles to our east along the Brahmaputra lies the lovely town of Gauhati—the ancient *Prag-Jyotishpura*, the capital of Narakasur, Bhogadutta and hundreds of other Kings before and after them.

It was in Assam that Princess Joymoti of sacred memories practised passive resistance and was slowly tortured to death under the order of the King. She cheerfully defied the most cruel death spurning the highest position offered to her yet firmly refusing to disclose the whereabouts of her beloved husband which she alone knew.

However poor our condition under the British *Raj* may be today, we are inheritors of a very ancient Hindu

culture, and I am proud to say that if there is any place, where catholic and progressive Hindu religion is a living force, that place is Assam. In days of yore, that the non-Aryan culture had to yield to Hindu culture is evidenced by the acceptance of overlordship by Asur Kings of the Aryan monarchs of Dehi. During mediaeval days, Hindu orthodoxy of a rather sordid character seemed to dominate the religious beliefs of the Assamese. But the preachings of two of the greatest religious reformers of that age, Sankara and Madhaba, and their Brahminical contemporary, Damodar, ushered into Assam an era of religious renaissance, the like of which can be compared only with the contemporary *Vaishnava* movement of India or the Protestant movement of Europe. These great teachers suffered privation at the hands of the powers that were and practised Satyagraha against the Brahminical hierarchy of Assam backed as they were by the powerful support of the Assamese monarch. But the truth came out triumphant in the end and these two mighty spirits have left for Assam such a catholic faith of *love, amity* and brotherhood that without adopting the process of conversion by missions, hundreds of our animistic brothers are being Hinduized and are being brought within the folds of Hindu society. It is for the preaching of these great spirits also that the evils of untouchability do not appear to be so acute as they do in other places of India. Mighty as they appear as religious teachers, no less great were they in the realm of letters. Assamese literature which is one of the most ancient of languages having Sanskrit origin, was greatly enriched by them in their songs, lyrics and poetry, and it is by their appeal to the higher human sentiment and to the soul at the same time that they attained such great successes as reformers. Before and after these great poets many noble writers in both prose and poetry flourished and I make bold to assert that their writings would adorn any of the best literatures of the world. In the domain of architecture also, one has merely to look round any place, from Dhubri to Sadiya and from the

North to the South, and he is sure to find temples and images, beautiful stone pillars, and engravings all proclaiming the existence of an ancient civilization and culture.

Kamrupa, the sacred land of progressive Hinduism is also a place of great pilgrimage for the Muslims, for, there is the Holy *Powa Mecca* at Hajo, within 15 miles from where we are sitting. I am proud to be able to say in this connection that it is in Assam where Hindus and Muhammadans have at all times lived in friendliest of friendly terms and are still doing so.

Friends, I am afraid, I am trying your patience by making references to some of the characteristics of Assam and the Assamese people; but I hope you will bear with me for a while when I make a brief reference to our family institutions of *Khaddar* and weaving. *Khaddar* movement, which is a problem of all problems in India today, was so very much simplified by the old Assamese that could we bring back into our midst the activities of those days, the boycott of foreign cloth would become unnecessary. It is, I suppose, an accepted fact today that production of *Khaddar* cannot be based on specialized labour however best our institution or organization may be. In order that spinning and weaving may prevail in all places and at all times production of *Khaddar* should be the aim of all families and spinning made into a living institution. This was exactly the position of the Assamese families of old. In Assam the best of ladies spun and wove and, although during the last 30 years, some of them seem to have forgotten spinning, weaving has nowhere been given up. There are yet several places in Assam where spinning in cotton, silk, *endi* and *muga* are done on an extensive scale, and cloths worth several lacs of rupees produced every year. One centre in Nowgong alone where the All India Spinners Association is working, has produced no less than 30,000 yards of *Khaddar* within three months only and in a season when the people do not generally spin. In weav-

ing we can surely claim to be some of the best weavers of India. Mahatmaji's expression that 'ladies of Assam weave fairy tales in cloth', although highly flattering to our ladies, is not surely an exaggeration. What I, therefore, feel regarding *Khaddar* movement is that in Assam we do not require so much *Khaddar* propaganda as much as an organization for supply of cheap cotton and other materials and implements and inducement to spin. I am also disposed to believe that because we have not given up spinning and weaving, we are, inspite of all our poverty, not destitute. It is a significant fact that out of 12 lacs of indentured labour in Assam, not one is an Assamese. *Khaddar*, in my opinion, may not be commercially a business proposition but economically it is perfectly sound.

Brothers and sisters, it was only in 1838 that the whole of Assam came under the British control, although one portion was taken in 1826 by the treaty of Yandaboo. We have undoubtedly had some improvements brought about by the British *Raj*; and we are very grateful to His Majesty's Government for them but, while cholera and kala-azar, *malaria* and small-pox are causing havoc to the people of Assam it is cruel, if not criminal, for the Assam Government to be thinking of increasing land revenue. But the severest indictment that the Government of Assam stand charged with is the wilful slow poisoning of the people of Assam by carrying on their immoral traffic in opium. And what is more, when a number of selfless workers raised their voice of protest by preaching temperance during the Non-co-operation, they were mercilessly flung into prison-house.

While the shadow of Jalianwala Bagh is still getting longer, while the blood stains of innocent babes on the brick walls of that Bagh are still proclaiming the brutality of Dyer, while the brave and patriotic sons of India are being slowly killed behind the prison bars without trial, while the Ordinances and repressive laws stand unrepealed, the Noble Lord commands that India must

co-operate unconditionally or she will be meted out with worst treatment. Let Gauhati Congress give a suitable reply to the Noble Lord, but I personally feel that India will not allow herself to be coerced into co-operation by such threat, and she will not barter birthright for a mess of pottage however tempting it might be. "Good, bad, indifferent, you must work the present constitution", dictates the Noble Lord, "or you will be given no further reforms". This, to my mind, means India's power of resistance must be crushed, she must be humiliated. Let Gauhati Congress, let the representatives of the people of India answer the challenge of the Noble Lord fairly and squarely, but I personally believe that the Councils should either be mended in a manner suitable for the attainment of *Swaraj* or should be ended completely. Let Gauhati Congress decide whether India should get back to her old mentality of begging for favours on bended knees with folded hands or that she should stand on her own rights and make a demand for her birth right. Let Gauhati Congress decide whether India should be humiliated into co-operation in the hope of getting some favours or that she should stoutly refuse co-operation till her legitimate rights are conceded to.

If we sincerely believe that *Swaraj* is India's birth right and if we honestly and earnestly mean to work for its speedy attainment, we must make Hindu-Muslim unity a living reality, and I firmly believe it to be possible if we really wish it. We must forthwith drive away the wicked and the selfish spirit of communalism; we must take back the untouchables at once and, above all, inspire confidence into the minds of the Indians of all communities, of the rich and poor alike, that Congress is a living organism, with a unity of purpose and unity of action working for the salvation of India.

I deeply regret to have to note the difference that is subsisting in the Congress camp today. How can I help deplored the cessation of personalities like Messrs. Jayakar and Kelkar, Dr. Moonje and Mr. Aney, of Lala-

jee and Malavyajee from the majority party of the Congress?

That great fighter for political freedom, Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das, declared that 1926 would be a critical year in the history of our country. I verily believe it to be so. We are today confronted with the gravest of problems India had to face within the last 6 years of choosing between co-operation and non-co-operation; between slavery and freedom, between subservience and self-reliance. On your wise decision on this subject alone rests the future of India. While the masses of India are looking upto you for a united verdict, while the situation calls for our best energies and united action, should it be proper for you to be carrying on a fratricidal warfare? Honest differences of opinion are undoubtedly inevitable in politics, but should we not close up our ranks, specially when the deceptive manœuvre of the enemies is threatening a complete rout? Should we not be able to sink all our differences when united and concerted action is the only sure weapon left in our hands in defeating our common enemy?

In such a critical state of the country I may be pardoned if I take the liberty of striking a personal note and appeal to Mahatma Gandhiji once again to give us the lead.

The magic land of Kamrupa has an old tradition that people staying here over three nights are converted into sheep, and we all know that the sheep have the peculiarity of following the leader faithfully. Let us hope, therefore, that the magic influence of this land will enable the fighting groups to settle their differences and make the Hindus and Muhammadans united in love and brotherhood and follow the leadership of the Congress like innocent lambs tended by the *gentle shepherd of Sabarmati*.

That tiny little *charkha*,—that wheel of Indian life, moved with unfailing regularity by that mighty little man, Mahatma Gandhi, is in my opinion not only spinning

yarns for the dumb millions of India, it is not merely laying a straight path for the economic salvation of India, but it slowly evolving that irresistible world force of non-violent non-co-operation which alone will be able to check effectively the deadly spirit of imperialism, which is out to crush the soul of Independence of the weak and the helpless nations.

Ladies and gentlemen, you as the worthy representatives of the Indian nation are called upon today bravely to stand by Indian nationalism and show us the right way to *Swaraj*. So lead us out of internal dissensions and guide us in our earnest endeavours for the speedy attainment of *Swaraj*. By your wise counsel and sincere tolerance make us forget our communal differences which are eating into the vitals of our national life. By your liberal policies and generous dealings, break down the petty manœuvres and show us the right path to a united action. By your noble example of self-sacrifice get us out of our wicked ways and inspire us into living an unselfish national life. Give us a bold lead towards the goal of *Swaraj*, instil courage into the hearts of the weakest of the weak and bring hopes into the millions of despairing minds by your loving message of confidence and success; declare with a united voice and determined spirit that we will fight with a grim determination all evil forces that might thwart us in our earnest attempt to win *Swaraj*, proclaim that you will fight to a finish at all cost the fair fight for freedom of our beloved mother land. I personally posses a great deal of robust optimism and I have a firm faith and a clear vision that freedom of India will come sooner than many people expect—if only we work honestly, earnestly and unitedly. Let not our success be judged in the measure of our achievements. Non-violent non-cooperation had worked wonders within the very short time it was practised. It has animated Indian life with a sense of manhood, it has infused that love for freedom for the mother land, which cannot be killed even by the most

inhuman methods of bureaucracy. It has taught us that the weakest nation has a right to rebel against the most powerful nation that tries to impose by strength of arms its will against the wish of the people.

In the course of our honest endeavour to secure freedom, should difficulties arise and despair come, let us not forget to say,

IYYAKA NAABUDU WA IYYAKA NASTAYEEN.

Let us prayerfully say unto God :

"Thou power supreme  
Whose mighty scheme  
These joys and woes of mine fulfil  
*Here* firm I rest  
They must be best  
Because they are Thy Will"

Our right to invite you to such a distant and a poor country is based upon our modest achievement, *during* the Non-cooperation movement, on the terrible sufferings undergone at that time by the people of Assam at the most cruel hands of the bureaucracy and, above all, in our sincere willingness to follow your lead through the Congress and do our honest best in the fight for Swaraj.

But I offer my humble apologies for detaining you so long by telling our provincial tales of joys and woes, for you have more important questions to answer and much more difficult problems to solve. Deliverance of a mighty nation enslaved by the merciless decree of Providence rests with you. I ask you with all the humility that I can command to forgive us for our many shortcomings and request you to begin your deliberations.\*

\* Delivered at the 41st session of the Indian National Congress, held at Pandu (Gauhati) on December 26, 1926, by late Sri Tarun Ram Phookun who was the Chairman of the Reception Committee.

## CHAPTER V

### GOPINATH BARDOLOI

[“It is difficult,” said Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, “to think of Assam without Gopinath Bardoloi. He had identified himself with the interests of his State, and for years the political life had so much intermingled with his great personality that we had come to think of these two entities being always synonymous”.

These words of the Sardar, on the death of Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi, sum up a proper estimate of the Assam leader. It is somewhat difficult to anticipate how future historians in India would paint the role which the Lokapriya had played at a critical juncture of India’s contemporary history; but it is certain that Bardoloi was a true leader of the people of Assam, an acknowledged friend of the tribes, the poor and the backward in this part of the land.

Admittedly, on no leader of Assam other than Lokapriya Bardoloi had fallen the heavy burden of governance of a difficult State like Assam at a time when events were moving at bewildering rapidity before and after the partition of the country. And it is a fact that he had borne this burden magnificently. The recent history of Assam is, as it were, history of the activities of Lokapriya Bardoloi beginning with his election to the Assam Assembly, and latterly, to the leadership of the Congress Parliamentary Party in Assam in 1937. It seems the rise and fame of this unassuming Assam leader was rather meteoric, but it was all the same inevitable. Whenever he spoke the Lokapriya spoke the voice of the people.

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

At times, Lokapriya Bardoloi was opposed to certain decisions of the Congress to which he belonged; but in this he had the blessings of his master, Mahatma Gandhi. Not that he loved India less, but that he loved Assam more: that perhaps guided him most in his public life. Those who knew him loved him, and wherever he went he carried the hallmark of a loyal and disciplined soldier ever ready to shed every ounce of his blood in the cause of the motherland.]

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## ABOUT ASSAM

By GOPINATH BARDOLOI

I thank you for the honour you do me in asking to come over here and to speak to you a few words about Assam. I appreciate your kindness, but I realize also my difficulty. To talk about a province in the course of 20 minutes or a half an hour would require such wit in brevity that, I am sure, I do not possess.

I feel that I cannot congratulate you when some of you seem to say that you know so little about Assam. It is a part of this great country—beautiful and wealthy in all that nature has given, but poor and neglected in all that man has done. In the busy world of today we have hardly time enough to look around us; and those who have it, are engrossed with what is close at hand. Therefore, the beauty in looking at a thing which is at some distance, the glory of helping one of your own, though remote, and of acting in collaboration with him for the common uplift is lost sight of, simply because he lives in a neglected corner of this great country. Nay, sometimes you are liable to be prejudiced by hearsay and gossip and even by false and lying propaganda by interested parties.

Yet not so were your forefathers many many centuries ago. And I can tell you without encroaching on the field of the antiquarian, archeologist and epigraphist, that Assam, then known as *Pragjyotisha*, and *Kamarupa* and her people, were better known to the rest of India even from pre-historic times than you seem to know their successors today. Recent researches into the

pre-historic period show that *Pragjyotisha* flourished in about 1,000 B.C. when lower Bengal was not there in existence. *Pragjyotisha* has been mentioned both in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and from descriptions given it would appear that the country stretched as far as the sea in the South with high elevation in the North. In the *Ramayana* it is stated that *Pragjyotisha* was built on a golden crested mountain which was 64 *Jojas* in extent and stood abutted on the bottomless *Varunalaya* (Sea). In the *Mahabharata*, Bhagadutta, King of *Pragjyotisha*, who helped the *Kauravas*, is also called *Sailalaya* (dwelling among the mountains) and it is stated that his troops consisted of Kiratas, Chinas and dwellers of the sea-coast. It is quite clear that the *mountains* mentioned were the Assam Hills ranges and the sea was the Bay of Bengal which stretched up to this Hill range. In west its boundary was Korotya or Teesta, to the east as far as the present Darrang district. Even at the cost of taking a bit of your time, I want to mention further some references to prove how much more the knowing people of India of the ancient and mediaeval period knew of Assam than we do today. The *Kalika Purana* which is thought to be a treatise written in the fourth or fifth century A.D. gives the description how Kamarupa came to get its name. In the fourth century again the *Prasasti* of Samudragupta mentions Kamarupa as a frontier kingdom of India in the East. He performed *Aswamedha* ceremony and the King of Kamarupa, Pusyavarman or Subahu, challenged his authority and submitted only after a fight. The famous poet, Kalidas, who is said to be flourishing in the fifth century A.D. mentions Kamarupa and *Pragjyotisha* as the same kingdom in his *Raghuvansam*. In the *Hanchcharitra* of Banabhatta, Kamarupa kings are mentioned chronologically for more than 150 years from the seventh century to the ninth century A.D. In the Kashmere chronicle, *Raj Tarangini*, mention is made of King Meghabahana of Kashmere marrying Princess Amritaprabha, daughter of Kamarupa King, Samendra Varman.

In a *Sayanvara* held by her father, Meghabahana received from the Princess Amritaprabha the bridegroom's garland. What Amritaprabha did in Kashmere as queen finds record in the annals of Kashmere. Vicent Smith mentions the deputation of an embassy to China by the King of Devaka, a kingdom east of Kamarupa in about the eighth century A.D. Three foreign travellers of great renown also describe Kamarupa. Ptolemy, the Greek traveller describes the country of Kamarupa at great length in the fourth century A.D. Huen Tsang went to Assam from Nalanda University at the invitation of the King Vaskar Barman and gave a full description of the land in the seventh century A.D. In the eleventh century, the Arab traveller, Alberoni, mentions Kamarupa among the countries of India. In the tenth century Raja Sekhara, the Court Poet of Mahipala, King of Kanauj, mentions *Pragjyotisha* as one of the countries of Aryabarta along with Maghadha, Paundra, etc.

The geography as corroborated by the Buddhist records and Greek accounts of more historical period, refers to the land of Kamarupa as having the tributary of Lauhitya (which is the Brahmaputra), Lohita Sagara in the south with islands there and to the West—Kausika or Kosi. Right from that time till the sixteenth century, when the Ahom from Thailand established their rule in the eastern portion of the land, Kamarupa stretched from Karotya river in the west, which includes the modern districts of Jalpaiguri, North Rangpur and Dinajpur to the eastern point of modern Assam with Bhutan Hills, as the northern boundary and the southern Bengal in the South. Between 400 A.D. and 1000 A.D. there were many occasions when the western boundary was stretched up to river Kausika, now known as Kosi.

The history of the above mentioned period has been built up from sources I have already mentioned, as also from the copper plates by which the kings made grants of lands etc. to the Brahmins and as religious endowments. The ruins in architecture of unsurpassable beauty

and in graceful sculptures round about Gauhati, Tezpur, Davaka and other places tell their own story even today. But from the thirteenth century A.D., we have in Assam authentic and connected history till to-day, both from authentic historical treatises such as *Shahnama*, *Aini-Akbari*, etc compiled in Moghul Court as well as from *Bansavali*s maintained in the courts of Koch Rajas and the *Buranjees* (History) of the Ahom Kings. And it is a very significant fact that almost in all important accounts they tally with one another. It is clear therefrom that both at the time of the supremacy of the Koch Rajas up to the *seventeenth* century and, principally, during the time the Ahom Kings ruled over Assam, till nearly the downfall of the Moghul Empire, a war was going on between the Muslim Subadars of Bengal at some time or with the mighty Moghul Emperors at other times, on one side, and the armies of the Koch, the Ahoms and the neighbouring kings like Manipur, Tripura and Khasi and Jaintia, on the other. Today I read of a propaganda in the Press in favour of Cooch Behar merging with West Bengal, on various grounds. To the people of Assam as also the people of Cooch Behar, nothing would appear more strange. It may be asserted with pride and glory that even the best army of the Moghul Emperor under the leadership of Generals like Mirjumla and Mansingh had to beat retreat after these wars. As a matter of fact, before the Burmese were invited to Assam as a result of feuds in the Ahom families, followed by the occupation of Assam by the British army, Assam maintained her independence throughout the entire period of history. The British policy made it possible for the Muslims to preponderate in Assam during the last 30 years of its rule. But as the people had regained their right to have a say in the administration of their country, they refused to submit to be grouped with Bengal, so arranged under the Cabinet Mission proposal. Today, Assam has come back to her own and is proud to be part and parcel of Independent India. Fears are entertained in certain quarters

about the danger of East Pakistan subjugating Assam. I can only say that, if the provinces and the States now acting in collaboration in the matter of the governance of this eastern region continue to go on, as now, there cannot be any ground for such fear. I repeat with all emphasis that we feel ourselves able to hold our own against any odds.

I fear, my description of Assam will not be complete unless I give you some idea of the people that lived there through ages. The anthropologists say that many thousands of years ago this land, as some other parts of India, was inhabited by Austric races. The traces of this fact, they say, are to be found in the Khasi language as also in the monoliths found in the Khasi Hills. It is, however, clear that the Mongolians migrated into this province through the eastern gate—the last to have come being the Ahoms. It can, therefore, be assumed that the substrata of the population belongs to the Mongoloid stock. According to historians it is also true that this part of the land was influenced from very early times by the Dravidian civilization with its highly developed culture. But the influence that was exerted by the more recent Aryans and the Aryan civilization was the greatest. It seems clear that almost from the earliest times when the Aryans came to India, streams of Aryan people reached the furthest corners of Assam through the route which ran by the foot of the Himalayas. From the earliest times till the thirteenth century we find that the court language of almost all the kings was Sanskrit just as in any other part of India, although the spoken language was Magadhan. From the description that we read about what prevailed during all this period, it is perfectly clear that Brahmanical influences on the society were always very great. In this connection one very important factor is worthy of mention. It is on account of the Brahmanical influences that Buddhism could not secure the same foothold in this part of India as in other places. It is legitimately surmised that a very large number of ritualistic

Brahmins of Asokan kingdom migrated to Kamarupa and found shelter there. It seems also that *tantrism* which prevailed in Kamarupa from the sixth century to the sixteenth century is a development in ritualistic behalf which obtained in India during the Buddhistic period. That Assam maintained a militant attitude towards Buddhism is proved by the fact that Sri Sankarcharyya received great welcome here, and Kumarilabhatta himself is known to be a Kamrupi scholar. From the fifteenth century A.D. contemporaneous with the Vaisnavic renaissance in other parts of India, Vaisnavism was gradually taking root in Assam. Kamrupi literature (with its own script) which was akin to Magadhan dialect in the seventh or eighth century, (slightly different from Sanskrit) is found to be prevailing in a widespread manner *from this time*. It is worthy of notice that Assamese prose started from that period. I think the translation of *Bhagavat* in Assamese prose known as *Katha Bhagavat* is one of the earliest prose compositions in the modern *languages* of the world. Vaisnavic *renaissance* in Assam finds the fullest and most glorious expression in the preachings and writings of Sri Sankardeva who resuscitated the whole Assamese society from Karotya to Nowgong from their belief in mystic *tantrism* to one of the simple and complete surrender to God. A glorious period of art, literature, culture and reconstruction of society followed, the spirit of which persists still today. The language that the people of Assam used to speak by this time was spoken by the people from Jalpaiguri to Darrang with, of course, slight dialectic variations.

The present boundaries of Assam, however, extend to regions far beyond where this Sanskritic language is spoken. Various tribes inhabit these regions. The tribal regions on the north of the Brahmaputra are administered by the Government of India under the North-East Frontier Agency and beyond what is known as "the Inner Line", and a large portion of the regions

to the south of the Brahmaputra is inhabited by Singphows (Kachins), Nagas, Khasis and Jaintias, Lushais, Garos, Kacharis and Mikirs. The Nagas themselves consist of 6 or 7 tribes speaking different dialects and having different manners and customs. These tribes in the south of the Brahmaputra are largely under the influence of the Christian missionaries and, in the Lushai Hills, as many as 70 per cent of its population of nearly 2 lakhs are Christians. All the hill tribes of Assam the total population of which is about 11 lacs. have distinct dialects, manners and customs, rules of inheritance, etc. each differing from the other very much more than one nation differs from another. The difficulties, therefore, of administering these areas can easily be understood. The watchword of the Government of Assam for their solution is understanding, goodwill, sympathy and service to these people.

Although, as already mentioned, the people of the Plains and the Hills have different culture, the entire population are subject to one common natural trait, viz. their love for art and craft and music and dance. I do not know whether the beauty of Nature which is so abundant in the Hills and Plains of Assam, in the blue peaks and the golden valleys, in the wide breast of the Brahmaputra or its green fields and forests, is not responsible for this artistic development in the nature of the various peoples that inhabit Assam.

Even today, both the people of the Hills and the Plains weave such beautiful and artistic fabrics that in 1921, Mahatma Gandhi in his tour in Assam, described the women of Assam as the weavers of "fairy tales in cloth". I must add here that the people of the Hills are no less experts in this art, although their products are more decorative with a fantasy of colours and weird pictures.

The ancient music and dance of the *Satras (Maths)* of Assam yet retain their oriental character in such

purity that Asha Devi of Wardha remarked that "in the *Satras* of Assam the pure tradition of Indian religious music and dancing are still preserved, and I feel that they will help to purify Indian cultural life, if they were known to the rest of India".

In the matter of craft in bamboo and cane works, ivory and bell metal works and sometimes even in wood works in some places, artistic designs are conceived and fully executed. The works of architecture, sculpture and even painting in the ancient and mediaeval times, which have now more or less been effaced by the ravages of times, compare favourably with the works of other parts of India at their highest stage; and, what is more interesting is that treatises on dance, music, architecture, besides of course those on treatment of men and animals and so many other subjects, are yet found existent.

It would, I believe, be of some interest to study the topography of the modern province today in particular reference to its flora and fauna and perhaps its forests and minerals. It will be seen that Assam of today is mainly composed of the valley of the mighty Brahmaputra flowing in between two mountains ranges, the maximum height of the northern range being as high as the Kanchanjanga and the maximum height of the southern range being over 6,000 feet. Assam today has 56,000 sq. miles within its borders, leaving out 7,000 sq. miles of territory opting for Pakistan. Out of this, nearly 36,000 in the Hills and only 20,000 are divided between the Brahmaputra valley and the valley of Surma falling in Cachar district. About 11 lacs of hills people live in this Hills region, while about 64 lacs of people of the plains live in the plains which include also 2,500 sq. miles of the sandy bed of the Brahmaputra and the tracts of land in fallow and high lands strewn with pebbles and sands. The figures that sometimes appear in papers about the availability of millions of cultivable land are a fable. If the forests and the cultivable and habitable land of the people could be distributed scientifically, instead of

keeping 13 per cent of land in reserve forests as now, we might easily have as much at least 40 per cent. The hills regions could have been organized for forest regeneration with the hills people taking recourse to settled cultivation instead of shifting one, *Jhumming*, as now. This might have saved the cataclysm to which the province, nay, the whole region in the east, is subject by the ravages of nature. One has only to describe a normal monsoon to show what it means. Six to eight weeks before the monsoon begins, westernly and warm gales begin to blow continuously, spreading the whole country with dust and seeds of various plants and trees. Then start the thunder, hails and showers; the sky gleams with brilliant light and appalling sound, and almost every night from about the middle of April, start heavy showers of rains. The hills and streams in the hills, which were so long dry, show themselves in sparkling white streaks in blue hills, begin to rush down and, as the monsoon proceeds, join with hundred others to fill in the rivers. These again, in their turn, run down precipitously to the wide breast of the Brahmaputra which begins to froth, foam and boil, striking terrors into the heart of beasts and men. The level of this mighty river often times rises to such heights that the whole of the valley comes under waters and, if it rains for any continuous period, floods and havoc are created both by the feeder rivers as also by the Brahmaputra. Before the monsoon starts, the land in the hills are all loosened and made ready for cultivation and, with the rush down of this avalanche of water from the hills and mountains, not only wild animals including sometimes elephants, big reptiles, flotilla of drift wood etc. are brought down, but also very stupendously large quantity of soil that spread themselves in the beds and the banks of the feeder rivers as also in the whole plains going as far as the sea. No data about the quantity of this huge mass of soil is possible; but the fact that what were mere dots of earth in South Bengal sea could form themselves into the big delta with many hundred square miles of solid territory in course of

3,000 years only, gives us some indication of what these rivers are doing us.

Heavy rainfall which varies from 120" to 60" in the plains regions and with as much as 500" in Cherrapunji has given Assam her richness in flora and fauna. The forests of Assam abound in all species of herbs, plants and trees known to botanists; nay, some of them had to invest new names for unknown species. They are rich both in hard and soft wood, *Sal*, *Bunsum* and teak are some of the former, while *holong*, *holoka* and *simul* are some of the latter. The former brings to the Government of Assam an annual revenue of rupees 25 lakhs to 30 lakhs while the latter feed the existing plywood factory with the possibility of feeding 2 or 3 more such factories. Besides this, they supply enough timber for a match factory or two. In the field of fauna, we yet retain in our game sanctuaries rare type of rhinoceros, vast varieties of deer, wild buffaloes and, almost in every forest, big and small tigers, leopards, bears and wild animals of all species and kinds are met even today. Wild elephants alone being to the coffers of the State Government not less than rupees 2 lakhs annually on the average. In the feathered kind also, apart from the common species that you find everywhere in India, birds of the rarest varieties with beautiful plumage and sweetest melodies greet you in the forests of Assam. In the winter descend from the heights of the Himalayas innumerable varieties of ducks and geese and feed in the *beels* (swampy areas) and low-lying fields of Assam which retain the flood water for about the whole of the year.

It is also due to rainfall and the peculiar quality of the soil that have helped in the development of tea industry in Assam. About 16 lacs of acres of land are held under lease by the tea planters, three-fourths of which are Europeans. About 7 lacs of labourers work inside these gardens, and are supplemented by a strength of another 2 lacs working from outside. They are all imported from other parts of India. About four and a

lac acres of land are under tea, the rest are occupied by factories, bungalows, cultivable land occupied by labourers and some areas of waste. Assam produces two-thirds of the tea produced in India which is more than 350 million lbs., and bring to the Central Government a revenue of 6 to 7 crores of rupees in excise and export duty and to the State only about 40 lacs of rupees as agricultural-income tax.

Apart from the forests, the flora of Assam can very easily feed one or two pharmaceutical factories. The submontane regions of the Himalayas are full of *khoir* trees, from which *khoir*, for use with betel-nut, is extracted. *Agoru* scent is also extracted in the forests of Assam. But what can add to greater utility to the economy of India are the possibilities of easily having two or three sugar mills which, on account of the richness of cane, would yield larger production than the mills in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, two or three jute mills and one or two paper mills. In the year 1945-46, the Central Planning Committee of India allotted 2 units of sugar mills, 1 unit of paper mill and possibly 2 units of jute mills within the State. The Government of Assam thought of organizing these industries on the basis of ownership of these industries for Government, with the collaboration of the industrialists as managing agents. Subsequently, according to the change of policy in the Government of India, our Government decided to carry them on share basis. But, on account of the partition in the country and, possibly, also due to the unwillingness of the industrialists to invest in a remote State like Assam, all these projects have now come almost to a standstill.

In the hills and uplands are to be found the mineral wealth of the State. The northern hills range, which falls with Bhutan and China has not possibly come under the investigation of geologists and geophysicists; but in the Southern ranges lie the petroleum, coal, limestone and some sillimanite. The Assam Oil Company, almost

the same company as the Burmah Oil Company, work the petroleum fields at Digboi and are prospecting in a number of places. The total output is 65 million gallons a year, bringing to the coffers of the Government of India nearly 2 crores of rupees as excise duty, contributing only 10 or 11 lacs of rupees as ground rent, royalty on crude petroleum etc. to the State exchequer. It is worth mentioning that gas obtained from the oil mines with the exception of the Companies' requirements, is wasted coal is distributed through the entire hill ranges of Naga Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. The coal fields of Ledo and Margherita are worked by a Scottish Company. It was the estimate of Sir Cyril Froz that coal deposits in this area would be about 1,000 million tons. A portion of the Khasi Hills coal is feeding the Assam Bengal Cement Company, and tea garden factories now in Pakistan. But the largest deposits have been traced in Siju area in the Garo Hills. It is very reasonably surmised that about 1,200 million tons of coal would be easily available, if this area was exploited for this purpose. Coal has also been traced in the Mikir Hills. Limestone for manufacture of cement is available in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Mikir Hills. So, two more cement factories are capable of being immediately started if facilities for transport were made available.

The topography of the State would naturally suggest the possibility of hydro-electric projects in the State. All the rivers of Assam, as I said elsewhere, run down from steep heights to the plains carrying large volume of waters from the Hills from either side. The Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Department had some rough survey of the possibilities of developing hydro-electricity in Assam, and they are of opinion that, besides many possibilities in minor and smaller rivers, four major projects are possible, the chief of them being the Brahmaputra and Manas with the possibility of yielding 5 million kilowatts and 2 million kilowatts respectively. A sum of money has been allot-

ted for more detailed survey of these projects. The Government of Assam are however anxious that minor projects from smaller rivers are surveyed so that development may be possible at lesser cost and shorter time and with the immediate possibility of utilization of powers generated in these projects.

Geologists speak of large mineral deposits in regions which are in Assam but which have not yet been brought under proper investigation. From a reading of the history it seems that gold dusts were collected in the sandy beds of some of the rivers in Assam by the Ahom kings of old, particularly from a river known as Subansiri which has its source in the Bhutan hills. These operations have now ceased, but the hunters after gold yet think that there must be something there. I do not however propose to deal with what the gold hunters are thinking or are proposing to do. The fact remains that this part of the country is rich in everything, except perhaps in knowledge of the country and active sympathy from the people of the rest of India. Bapuji intimately knew Assam, and loved her people, possibly because they are backward and simple. You may read about it in the pages of *Young India*, of August and September, 1921. Ultimately he saved Assam from going to Pakistan. Today a real sympathy from the people of India can help in transforming this beautiful land into a highly developed part of India, contributing to its wealth, beauty and glory. I most cordially appeal for that sympathy from you.\*

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\* Delivered at a Rotary Club dinner at New Delhi in 1949.

## REMINISCENCES OF GANDHIJI

By GOPINATH BARDOLOI

Gandhiji did not come upon my life as a storm. We were much too young to be able to appreciate fully his noble life in South Africa and we knew but little about the inner spirit of the person, who led the movement of the Indians in South Africa. Even when he came to India in 1915, our information about him in Assam was not as enlightened as they might have been in other parts of India. And soon after, his work in Champaran and Khaida brought to our mind the dream of a new ideology, and a new method, the real value of which we were yet to fully appreciate. But, when in 1920 he asked the people to non-co-operate with the evil to purify themselves and fight the Britishers with non-violence and truth, it had a strange and fascinating appeal to me. To me it appeared as if I got back a track of life, which I was about to forget; and that even if we were not to obtain Swaraj in a year, which Mahatmaji promised on the fulfilment of certain conditions, the inner soul in us would receive a training in the process which would be all for our good. To me his appeal was a sort of call to the spirit in man which sometimes becomes irresistible. When, therefore, Gandhiji came to Assam, I, at any rate, had already accepted him as a political as well as a spiritual *Guru*, the latter having a stronger hold on me than the former.

To receive him the volunteers, who had only been very recently trained, were asked not to touch his feet while he passed by them. I was then the Secretary of

Gauhati District Congress Committee and naturally I secured a place of precedence to meet in front line of the volunteers. I cannot describe the thrill and the ecstasy I felt as he marched past me. I did obey the command not to touch his feet but I remember having touched the ground he trod upon. Gandhiji was accompanied by Maulana Mohammed Ali and Moulana Azad Sobhani. He stayed at the residence of the late Sri Tarun Ram Phookun, his greatest lieutenant in Assam and the unique leader of the non-co-operation movement. While there we got full opportunity of serving him. Gandhiji had not yet taken to loin cloth; he put on the *kurta* of a normal size and had the Gandhi cap on him. He was full of mirth and humour in all that he talked and discussed and he kept all round him in similar mood. He could go to sleep almost the next moment after he expressed his desire to do so. His food consisted of goat milk and fruits, fresh and dried; but what impressed me about it was that he could take an average Assam pineapple (weighing not less than 3 lbs.) at a stretch. I well remember how keenly anxious he was to inspect the implements and products of cottage industry, particularly our hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, how pleased he was to find that the ladies of Assam were all dressed in spotless white and natural colours. He addressed a meeting of about 10,000 people, the largest ever seen in Assam till then, before which a big bonfire of foreign cloth, collected from all over the town was burning. During this visit he travelled all over Assam and even met the European planters at Dibrugarh. He recorded his impression about Assam and her leader, Sri Tarun Ram Phookun, in the pages of *Young India* in a language, which brings joy to the men and women of Assam whose hearts he had already won.

Being a land of the European planters, Assam was the first of the provinces to have repression in a very wide scale and, by November, almost all the leaders of Assam found themselves inside the prison bars,

ostensibly for carrying on a vigorous temperance propaganda, on account of which the excise revenue of Government was brought down by more than half in the course of 8 or 9 months. I was one in the Police list but, being made also a member of the A.I.C.C. in the meantime, it was conveyed to me that I and two other friends should go to Ahmedabad where the annual session of the Congress would be sitting. We were to meet Gandhiji and appraise him about the situation in Assam and carry back his instructions for the workers. Friends accompanying me elected me as the spokesman and, in the temporary shed erected for Gandhiji in Ahmedabad, I had the opportunity of sitting long hours with him and see him at work. The Congress Working Committee, it may be remembered, made him the sole dictator of the Congress, and it was indeed a marvel to me then how any human being could work so much as twenty hours of the day over subjects, which determined the destiny of the country; and this strain, I understood, continued for weeks and months. Although not a member of the Working Committee I was called to these small meetings sometimes early at 4 in the morning and had to leave it at 12 at night, with only just the intervals for our food. Gandhiji had discarded his normal dress in the meanwhile and had taken to loin cloth. With a hand-spun and hand-woven rug wrapped round him, he was found sitting with his legs folded, his body erect like a *Sadhu*—now discussing momentous issues such as the release of the Ali Brothers on compromise with British Government by withdrawal of the non-co-operation movement etc. and, at other times, dictating and correcting notes to the Press and so on. The inner decisions were not then known to me, but the open manner in which he discussed the questions in presence of a person like me only demonstrated to me how everything that he thought, uttered and directed for action was an open book to all. To me he gave the message that the purport of the speeches for which Sri Tarun Ram Phookun and Sri Nabin Chandra Bardoloi

were arrested and convicted should be put down in writing, and workers from a hundred platforms should utter them and court imprisonment; that we should not relax picketing before liquor and opium shops, if we had volunteers who could remain non-violent under the highest provocation. We should, in this manner, continue to court imprisonment till the last worker. He further impressed on me that if, by our non-violent determination, we could rouse the fury of the British Police forces to shoot and kill us, the victory would all the more be ours. I did not reach my fellow workers to be able to tell all this, as I was immediately put in custody as soon as I arrived in Assam. I was released after some days but was again sentenced to a year's imprisonment to bear an unthinkably hard jail life which was made joyful to me in the realization that I was able to follow what Mahatmaji wanted of us.

The next time when I met Gandhiji in Assam was in December 1926, when he attended the Congress session held on the bank of the Brahmaputra at Pandu. Bapu's hut was put only a few yards from the steep bank and the December cold wind blew against it. Gandhiji, as all of us in the camps and outside, was shocked to hear the assassination of Swami Shraddhananda, which rendered the whole proceedings of the Congress dismal. To add to this, a biting gale began to blow in all fury, followed by bitter cold showers of rain, which did not permit the proceedings of the conference to be carried beyond the second day. I was the pandal secretary and had hardly any time to take my food; yet I did accompany Gandhiji when he opened the Khadi exhibition and heard him speak with rapt attention both in the A.I.C.C. and the open session. But Gandhiji himself left on the second day of the session on account of this sad incident, and the session itself ended too soon.

I had the chance of meeting him again at Gauhati in 1934, when the Reception Committee arranged to put him at the place of Dr. H. K. Das. He had come here to

study the condition of the *Harijans* in Assam and to raise funds for their uplift. He found, somewhat to his satisfaction that the evils of untouchability did not prevail in Assam to the same extent as it did in other parts of India; but he was pained to find how the city fathers of Gauhati treated their scavengers. He received an address from the Gauhati Municipality and expressed his desire to inspect the quarters provided for the municipal scavengers. The then chairman of the Municipal Board was apparently afraid to face Gandhiji and sent me to deputize him. I had to bear the brunt of his censure at the time of the inspection, which included even the cooking pots of the inmates. Thank God I was elected the chairman only a few months later, and our first acts almost were to build new quarters for these servants of the municipality and remove them to a better site.

During this visit also he called the workers of Hindustani Prachar—only a few of us—to a sort of private meeting, and discussed with us how we were carrying on our work. I, as the president of the Samiti, narrated to him our difficulties in so many things. Then he gave out some of those truths for the outspokenness of which he was always known. He said that there was little utility for a samiti whose purpose would be anything but to teach Hindustani to non-Hindustani speaking people. If funds for such purposes were not available we should close down the show. As regards teachers he said that the stage for getting teachers from outside was already over and it was time to send Assamese young men to get training in Hindustani elsewhere and utilize their services in the prachar work. I need add here that, after this, we used to send out yearly a small number of teachers from Assam to receive their training in Wardha, and Kakasaheb Kalekar soon became their guardian, being at the same time a sort of director of Hindustani education in Assam with Sri A. T. Nanavati as the Secretary.

Irony of fate drove me to be a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1936, and it was almost a surprise to me when I found myself elected as the leader of the Congress Party in the Assam Legislature in 1937, only with 31 members in a House of 108. I had nothing to do in the shaping of the Congress decision, under Mahatmaji's advice, in favour of acceptance of office. I did not yet know what was Mahatmaji's own view regarding a coalition ministry, although I knew something about the inner controversy that was waging among the members of the Working Committee during the presidentship of Sri Subhas Chandra Bose in 1938. The President himself was its strongest advocate. I did not myself feel very happy about a Government which had to rely for its existence on factors other than solid Congress discipline. But, while the inner controversy was going on, the Muslim League Cabinet in Assam resigned on the introduction of a no-confidence motion on Government in September, 1938. The Opposition had to accept Government or allow the Ministry with no-confidence to run on. We informed both the President and Maulana Azad to come and advise us. The former came and asked me immediately to tell the Governor that I would be forming the Ministry. And I obeyed the President.

After our assumption of office, we were there only for 13 months before we were directed to resign on the War issue. A number of leaders from Sylhet represented to the Working Committee and Mahatmaji against such a step. But we followed the lead given by the Working Committee and resigned in November, 1939. Within a year again came the anti-war satyagraha. This time almost the entire body of members from Sylhet, as also the other members of the coalition party other than Congress members of Assam agreed that the Assembly members should not be directed to join *Satyagraha*, as in Sind, and be allowed to fight the Muslim League Ministry who continued opening up the grazing reserves of Assam and

allowing the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal to perpetrate all manner of atrocities on the local people, particularly the innocent tribal people of the plains. A deputation consisting of the late Sri A. K. Chanda and Sri B. N. Mukherjee to represent the view that we should continue to function in the Legislature, and myself to represent the view-point of the Assam Congress that we should join the *Satyagraha*, decided to go to Wardha. I had to accompany the deputation to Wardha and met Mahatmaji in October, 1940. I, of course, pointed out the evils of a Muslim League Government in Assam and the necessity of resisting them, whenever we were in legislature; but I told him that, as the issue of satyagraha was an all-India one, the Assam Provincial Congress and the Assam members of the Assembly had decided to join it. Sri Bidyanath Mukherjee used all his arguments against *Satyagraha* in Assam and what surprised me most was that the author of the *Satyagraha* himself expressed against our joining *Satyagraha*. He, however, ultimately said that the final decision rested with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad the President and that, since he was coming to Wardha next day, we should first meet him and explain to him the position and then we could meet him again with the President at 3 p.m. the next day. I told Maulana Saheb our point of view and so did our friends from the Surma Valley. In the afternoon we met the Mahatma and the Maulana all together as arranged. The danger of an unopposed Muslim League Government in Assam was again stressed with great emphasis; but the Maulana told Mahatmaji that exception against *Satyagraha* was already made in case of Sind and if another province was to be left out, the whole objective would be frustrated. He sympathized with the difficulties of Assam and repeated that the British power would soon have to bend, when the first thing he would do would be to take up the case of Assam. Mahatmaji fixed his gaze on me just for two seconds, but I had already given my opinion to Maulana Saheb in the morning. In the next second or two, he said, "You have to follow the President of the

Congress". And we did follow him. The reason for my taking this length in the narration is due to a subsequent reference by Gandhiji about this decision. Seven years later, I happened to consult him on another matter, which I shall narrate afterwards. Then he told me that I must have the strength to fight out any wrong against anybody, even if it were the Working Committee of the Congress. He said it was a mistake on my part to have yielded on the issue mentioned above. I was surprised to find how he could keep such details in his mind for long seven years.

Between 1940 and 1942 August, I had more frequent occasions to meet Bapuji and see his handiwork in Wardha, which became a pilgrimage to me. It was during this time that I had the occasion not only to study the vast panorama of life he was proposing for the villagers of India, the depressed and the neglected, but also the details of experiments that were being carried on by his devoted followers at Sevagram and Wardha. Kaka-saheb Kalekar was to me, as it were, an initiator of the mysteries of a temple. I was always a believer in what we call constructive work; but these visits to Wardha convinced me that constructive work was both a truthful method of fighting the evils of a foreign rule as well as for laying the foundation of a free non-violent society. In one of my visits I was introduced to the Japanese monk who made his ashram his home for long time, and a Swiss mechanic who made the *Dhanush Takli*. I met the great learned Sanskrit scholar, stricken with leprosy, and had the opportunity of hearing from his own lips how fondly he was nursed by Bapuji; and gradually I became the friend and acquaintance of all the devotees that moved round the orbit of Gandhiji's residence. It was then that I came to know how kind and impartial he was to all of them; for, while the politicians would have fixed hours for talk with him, they went and discussed matters at any time they would find opportunity to meet him. He was found discussing what I consider domestic matters of

the ashramites with as much seriousness as he would be found discussing the greatest political problems. Is it, therefore, surprising that some of them should visit with one another to receive as much of his affection and attention as they could get?

In December, 1940, I was imprisoned for a year for offering *Satyagraha* along with a number of our friends; but our life this time was made very much easier by the jail authorities. Apparently, Bapuji was taking interest in all the satyagrahi prisoners and became, as it were, a sort of monitor to us. He was imposing on us duties which the jailor did not. For possibly in January 1941, Sri Mohadev Desai of respected memory wanted me to write to Bapuji to tell him how we were passing our time in jail; and I wrote to him more than once to tell him that some of us were working at the rate of 14 to 15 hours a day with four to five hours given to spinning. I wrote to him how some of us, who were indifferent spinners became great adepts in spinning in no time. Not knowing that he had explained in his *Anasakti Yoga* (commentary on the *Gita*) that non-violence was also a doctrine taught by the *Gita*, I wrote to him for his opinion in the matter. But all that he said, in reply, was to send a copy of Hindustani translation of *Anasakti Yoga* through Sri Mohadev Desai.

In the jail I contemplated on Gandhiji's views about the equality of religion, and I thought that I should try to bring home the same to the youthful minds by writing, in Assamese, a series on the lives of *Avatars* like Raja Ramchandra, Buddhadev, Christ and Muhammad. Lastly, I sought Bapuji's permission to write also his life, not only to explain how he interpreted the equality, but also to prove that the method of action undertaken by him was like of the Prophets of old. It was only when I had again explained to him the object of writing the book that I got the permission. To my deep regret his life remains unfinished even to-day.

Henceforward, Bapuji became a sort of active and driving force in my life. I was released from jail on grounds of health in June, 1941. All my comrades of the Assam Assembly had not yet come out of jail; so, I sought his permission to attend the Assembly. He readily gave it. And before the session was out in December, 1941, Sir Saadullah's Ministry resigned on account of their prominent Hindu Minister, Sri Rohini Kumar Choudhury's resignation, and the Governor had to take the responsibility of the Government of the Province under Section 93. Just about this time, Japan joined the War and was dashing forward towards us. I suggested to Gandhiji that *Satyagraha* in Assam should be immediately suspended, and that we should organize a peace brigade for a drive in self-sufficiency and for maintaining a non-violent morale of the people. It was possibly in March 1942 that the Working Committee of the Congress adopted a resolution to the same effect; but under Mahatmaji's advice, we in Assam had already an enrolment of many hundreds of recruits for this peace brigade. When hundreds of refugees who had already begun their trek to India through mountains and valleys of Eastern India leaving many of them dead on the way, the *Santi Senas* of Assam were well organized here to give succour and relief to those unfortunate people.

When I saw Gandhiji in April of this year, never did I find a person more bitter against the British rule, and I could understand that some momentous step was already taking shape in his mind. He wrote to me in June when he distinctly said that I was to feel and act like a man in the fullest state of independence, and that all Congress men should feel and act likewise. Then, of course, followed events which the world knows so well that I feel they should not form part of my reminiscences. I met him on the morning of the fateful Quit India Resolution, at Birla House in Bombay. I could not fully inform him all about Assam when he was called to the meeting of the Working Committee which I did not attend.

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Bereft of his life's companion and his devoted Secretary, Bapuji was released from his custody at Aga Khan Palace only two months before I was released in January, 1944, myself also on grounds of health but yet an internee. The change from the world that I had left in 1942 to the one to which I was brought out in 1944 was so strange and remarkably different that I felt that I was not fit to live in it. This part of the country was a big theatre of war. Big movement of innumerable military convoys, railway movement of numerous special trains were passing through the villages and towns of Assam causing innumerable accidents and many deaths. Numberless wounded and dying persons were being brought by special trains from Manipur and Burma fronts to the steamers: many to find rest from their agonies on the wide breast of the Brahmaputra! Exaggerated tales of debauchery, rape and murder by our army men were being given undue currency and the morale of the people, in some places, were worsened by forcible requisition and occupation of lands and houses of the villagers. Amongst the people of the province itself, the population of which increased by several lakhs, in not a few did sordid and base instincts appear to be the ruling motive; and moral courage and man's capacity to fight evils appeared to me to be a thing of the past. In this mental anguish, I approached Gandhiji for advice. I wrote long letters and sent a few of them through my young friend, Sri Mohendra Mohan Choudhury, who had also come out of jail shortly. Gandhiji himself was very anxious to hear about the situation in Assam.

In one of his letters he wrote in reply to the query of some of our underground workers, through me, if the women of Assam could use knives and daggers to save their honour. Gandhiji's unequivocal reply was that they could and they should.

In the meantime, the Muslim League Ministry, which was installed in August, 1942, caused the worst harm to the people of the land and the graziers in parti-

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cular, by filling almost all the vacant places with Muslim immigrants. The demand from a large section of the people of Assam was that if the Congress Party members were to enjoy their holiday in jail, they had better resign their seats in the Legislature leaving others to fight out the menace. I thought, they were possibly right. No evils should be allowed to go unchallenged; and Bapuji was approached to direct us what to do. Once again, he told us unequivocally to go to the Assembly and fight out whatever I considered to be wrong.

In October, 1945 while attending the A.I.C.C. meeting at Poona, Kaka Saheb Kalekar mentioned to Gandhiji the condition of my health and wished that I should receive Nature Cure treatment at Dr. Dinshaw Mehta's clinic where Bapuji and Sardar Patel were also undergoing treatment. I will not forget the evening when he spoke so sweetly to me and Kaka Saheb about his own reminiscences, how he suffered temporarily from effects of high blood pressure and became almost blind of sight and so many things. But to remain three months in a hospital was something for which I did not come prepared; and what was worse, friends from Assam, who came to Poona and Bombay began to drag me to the coming election. Kaka Saheb knew my difficulty and my mind, and reported this to Gandhiji who said: "You could bring a horse to water, but you cannot force him to drink".

In December, 1945, Gandhiji decided to come to Bengal. I thought, I would seek this opportunity to bring him to Assam also; and one can easily realize how happy the people became to hear that the idol whom they worshipped would be in their midst. But that fact itself became a source of grave trouble to those who made arrangements to receive him. Scores of telegrams began to pour in asking us to bring him to this place and that. For fear of unpopularity the friends left everything to me to do as I like. I knew Gandhiji would be too ill to move about, and he wrote to me that he

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could serve Assam to his best advantage by remaining at one place just as he was doing for Bengal from Sodepur Ashram. At first, I thought, I would persuade him to go to two or three places; but after the above letter, we decided that he should stay at Gauhati only. We made a small bamboo hut of mat and thatch in the land of Dr. H. K. Das at Sarania just on the outskirts of the town of Gauhati—such as people here make for receiving their spiritual *Gurus* on the banks of the Brahmaputra; and this man of God was found as happy, if not happier, than in the palacial mansions of a Birla or Thakersay. On his way to Gauhati in January, 1946, he visited the silk weaving demonstration at Sualkuchi on the sands of the *Brahmaputra*. Here a crowd of ten thousand men and women sang *Ramdhun* with Sri Kanu Gandhi, Satis Babu, Srimati Amrit Kaur, and others who accompanied Gandhiji.

While here, *Gandhiji* had his daily morning walk *and the rustics* consisting of boys and girls, Muslims and tribal people would fondly wait by the side of the village path to see him pass. He met and addressed all the Congress workers from different parts of Assam. He spoke to them on their responsibilities in connection with constructive work. He settled a controversy about Hindi and Hindustani which was occupying the minds of the Congressmen and persons interested in the subject. On this subject he told me that if I believed in the truth about Hindustani, I should try to follow it even if I were to be alone. Every afternoon, before sunset, we had prayers with *Ramdhun* in the town where assemblages of 20 to 25 thousand clapped and heard in rapt silence the after-prayer speeches of Gandhiji.

But a great surprise awaited me on one evening when I found that he was taking lessons in Assamese spelling from two or three little children of 8 or 9 years in the corner of his hut. He was uttering at that time with these 'great scholars' and had also written something in Assamese character. He caught my

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eyes as soon as I entered the hut and a sweet smile beamed out from his face. It is, in the same afternoon, to a question that Hindustani would be an additional burden on students, he replied that it was not difficult to acquire passable knowledge of many languages. I then learnt that he was learning Bengali at Sodepur in the same way.

The time for Gandhiji to leave Assam now came, and it was decided to have a 30-hour trip by a steamer up to Dhubri, from which place he would take the train. We chartered a steamer but Bapu would not like to come in the steamer for which, he said, we would have to pay so much. Then he suggested to me that he and his party should be allowed to pay. It was only after some persuasion by Satis Babu and myself that he agreed to come. This trip was one of the most pleasant events of my life. We had prayers on board the steamer which was quite spacious, and we all were so near him. We had a most glorious sunset one evening. The entire western sky was all crimson and, in the midst of it, the radiant orb—itself a red ball,—was sinking on the wide breast of the Brahmaputra. Gandhiji came out of the cabin and stood for about two minutes witnessing the glory of the scene. I am sure he vastly enjoyed it. Then he turned to me and said he had seen such sunsets on the sea only. On the way we stopped only at Goalpara, and the same night at 10 p.m. he left Assam never to come back again !

The Cabinet Mission came and gave us Grouping of the provinces as their Award, and Assam was to join Group C. I heard the announcement as it was communicated through the radio on the night of 16th May while I was on my way to attend a conference at Delhi. I got extremely worried and could not sleep the night, visualizing the likely evils of the arrangement. Sri Baidyanath Mukherjee, a then Minister of our Cabinet, accompanied me and our first duty immediately after our arrival was to knock at the gate of every member of the

Working Committee, all of whom, excepting the President of the Congress, seemed to accept the arrangement. It took me long to appraise them of the difficult circumstances of the province and its multifarious problems. I pointed out the grave injustice to a province with 9 votes, being subjected to another province with 8 times as many of votes, to determine her future. But the reply that I generally received was that we should have nothing to fear as we could go out of the Grouping, if it was found that Assam was being subjected to wrongs in the Sections. I will not try to repeat what controversy I had with the leaders and how distracted I felt in those days over this question. In this state of mind I went to Gandhiji and lay bare before him the working of my mind. I told him that all the future that I was contemplating for the people of Assam in discharge of my responsibilities would be rendered impossible if Grouping was accepted. (Sri Baidyanath Mukherjee was present with me all the time; and he told me afterwards that from the manner in which I presented my case before him, Gandhiji was justified in chastising me in the manner he did). Gandhiji queried, "Was I not a Prime Minister of a Province and is it in that way that I would discharge the responsibilities of my high office? There was nothing to be impatient or to lose one's balance". He repeated that I was the Prime Minister of a province and that nobody could force anything on my province against my wishes. I then told him the reaction of the members of the Working Committee; but he told me that the Working Committee could never force anything on an unwilling province to its detriment. Therefore, if I thought that it was a grave wrong to my province, I should fight it out and not yield to anybody. He told me that the Working Committee would never be unreasonable, but I shall have to fight it out with them also if they adopted an attitude not consistent with the best interests of the province. I only asked for his blessings which, I felt, he gave with all his heart. I came out of his camp

in the Harijan Colony in New Delhi not only relieved of much of my anxiety, but a braver man also. Indeed it is on account of the infusion of this spirit that I felt myself equal to fight out this evil against the machination of the Muslim League in my province and in the Party deliberations of the members of the Constituent Assembly or elsewhere. In the mentality created by the Statement of the 17th May on minds endowed with legalistic lore and static and stereotyped temperament, my attitude was interpreted as opposed to the best interests of India. In the Constituent Assembly and in the Working Committee, I soon found that the forces were thickening towards accepting the Award; and I was being thrown to the ugly alternative of either accepting the Award and bringing ruin to the province, or of breaking away from the Constituent Assembly and the Congress, to bear whose allegiance was a pleasure and a duty to me all these 25 years. I spent many a prayerful hours to decide what to do, and the conclusion that I came at last to was that Gandhiji and Gandhiji alone could save Assam.

Gandhiji was then carrying on his broad shoulders but in weak health the burden of our great sin of communalism in the Muslim ravaged villages of Noakhali, and was distributing the life-giving nectar of love and peace in place of the destructive poison of hatred and strife. I decided to send two friends of ours, Sri Mohendra Mohan Choudhury and Sri Bijoy Chandra Bhagavati, with a letter from me to give us his directions. I do not want to quote anything from the letter; it was only a plaintiff's appeal for a direction to me. But immediately came the reply in the same strain, as in his last conversation, viz., that I should stand firm and not yield. He reiterated: nobody could hold me if I yielded; but if I refused to agree, nobody could force anything on an unwilling people. The letter was published soon after this. I did not know how it was

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done but it had a tremendous effect and the moral justification of my stand was fully vindicated.

A week or two after, I myself travelled to his place —a village six miles from Khazirkhal where Satis Babu was staying in the midst of ruins created by the evil spirit in man. Pandit Nehru and Acharyya Kripalani, the President, had also gone there the same day. Thakkar Bapa was lying ill in one corner of the house, where I met Bapuji. He expressed genuine pleasure at seeing me, and said that he had already said what he had to say in the matter, and that I should not have taken the trouble to come over there. Then, by the way, he asked how was it that the letter got published, and laughing all the time said in Hindustani: "Not that I would not publish a letter which I wrote in private, but there was certain unpleasant reference which might as well have not been published". I said I did not know who did so and added that, looking from the publication itself, it appeared to have gone from Chaumohani. Just at the time Panditji appeared with certain drafts—I do not know if they were not connected with the subject of Grouping itself. I explained that I had come to "canvas" Bapu and, after a row of laughter from Bapu, I left the place. Coming and going back I walked about 9 miles that day. I remember that, on that day also, I was accompanied by Sri Baidyanath Mukherjee. I remember the tiredness I felt. But both in going and coming back, I was thinking all the way what ocean of love force Gandhiji must have in him to make him walk nearly that distance almost everyday.

It may be sometime in 1947, that I met Gandhiji again. The division of India was effected and referenda in Sylhet and N.W.F.P. were also over in favour of the Muslim League. Murder, arson, loot and rape—each community trying to outdo the other in the two Punjabs—had begun on a scale never dreamt of. Referendum had decided the cessation of certain areas

from India to Pakistan, but the boundaries were yet to be determined by a Commission. Judges appointed by India and Pakistan both for the Punjab and Bengal including Sylhet could not agree and a British arbitrator had to do the final work. On the Assam side the Eastern Pakistan claimed the inclusion of Cachar, Goalpara and what not! The Judges were hearing the cases and the air was thick with all sorts of rumours. While at Delhi I found that some Khasi gentlemen and ladies having leaning for the Muslim League went there to meet Lord Mountbatten and Mr. Jinnah. Serious misgivings arose in my mind as to what the offshoot of this Commission would be. I spoke to Panditji about it and he wanted me to meet Lord Mountbatten and tell him the facts I mentioned to him. So, I went and told him that by any interpretation of the terms of reference of the Boundary Commission, Cachar and Goalpara did not come under the purview of the Boundary Commission, and I requested him to make that clear to the Boundary Commission. He agreed with me regarding the interpretation of the reference, but he said that since the whole matter was left to arbitration and the whole enquiry was in the nature of a judicial proceeding, it would not be proper for him to give a clear direction; but again, he repeated to me that the terms were so obvious that they could not include the two districts. Then he asked me whether I knew of any place of higher altitude in Sylhet. I said, a large part of Sylhet is below sea level and I knew of no place which was higher than 2 to 4 hundred feet. Then he brought me near a map and pointed out Shillong and the lower slopes of Khasi Hills. He said these areas were in Pakistan. I said that Shillong was the capital of Assam, and these areas were in Khasi and Jaintia Hills which were part of Assam. I came back without any more thought on the subject of this query then. In the meantime, the Khasi friends had an interview with Mr. Liaquat Ali and were arranging similar interviews with leaders of

Pakistan. On the second day, it suddenly flashed on me if Lord Mountbatten's query was not in any way connected with these moves and interviews. In my suspicion I argued within myself if Lord Mountbatten might not also think in the way as the Khasi representatives. To whom shall I go in this hour of doubt, misgiving and confusion but to one who has always removed them with his loving sympathy? It was sometime towards the end of July or beginning of August, 1947, and Gandhiji was sitting in his usual seat with only Srimati Amrit Kaur in the room. I narrated to him my fears and troubles mentioned above. But before I quite finished, he said: "I have heard all about your attitude regarding separation of Sylhet. Why did you agree to the referendum?" I told him that I was no party to it. But immediately came the retort, "Can anything happen in a province without its Prime Minister becoming a party to it?" I then told him all I knew: how Lord Mountbatten at a lunch to which I was invited, said that he presumed I was indifferent about Sylhet going to Pakistan. I told him, however that, while it was true that a large number of the people in Assam Valley wanted Sylhet to be separated and, at one time, even the Hindus of Sylhet wanted the same, the Congressmen of both the places wanted to live together as they fought a common fight together for ten long years under my leadership for weal or for woe. I told him also how Lord Mountbatten met the leader of Sylhet, the then Home Minister of our Cabinet (Sri Basanta Kumar Das), the same evening at a garden party and how the latter agreed to the referendum and how the Working Committee of the Congress endorsed it. I then put to him, "How can I fight the Working Committee?" Then he said rather firmly, "Did I not tell you that you should be prepared to fight any wrong? Why did you not do so? Seven years ago you did a mistake in adopting satyagraha in trying to follow the Working Committee." Then referring to the subject

under discussion he said. "I can do little for you. You had better gone to Sardar." I said, "I shall surely go to him, but, Bapu, you must do something." He was then as if thinking aloud—"Once you agree to an evil, you do not know where it will lead you." I was sitting there full 8 to 10 minutes mute while he was talking to himself and partially to Srimati. I read in his face a bitterness and a despair which, during the course of 25 years' experience, I had never seen before. He spoke in a very low tone—"I am never a man given to suspicion, much less act on suspicions. But looking at things around me, I feel suspicious of even the best actions of the Britisher." Then he became silent. I again repeated "Bapu, will you not do anything for me?" He did not reply but told me again. "Go to the Sardar." I obeyed him and went to the Sardar the next morning. I narrated my doubts and fears in the same way as I did to Bapuji; but Sardarji said that I was wrong in my suspicions, and that if I felt so strongly, why did I not speak to him earlier. I came back with the impression that he considered I was childish in my fears.

And verily I was! The next evening Sardarji gave a party at the Imperial Hotel to the Rulers of the States and their representatives in the Constituent Assembly, to which he invited Lord Mountbatten and all his colleagues in the Cabinet, the Premiers of the Provinces and many personages. I had only been 3 or 4 minutes in the room when Sardarji started without any introduction of the subject, "You see, Bardoloi, there was clear misunderstanding....." But by the time I began to understand him, an Aide-de-Camp of His Excellency was already at my side to tell me that His Excellency would talk to me. I went with him immediately and was about to take a seat nearby; but he made me sit by his side on the same satte he was occupying. He said, "On the day I met you, I could not explain to you certain things, which were yet confidential, but I can speak to you now. You see Sir.....was offered the Governorship of East

Bengal. He had three small children and his wife (he mentioned their age). He could not keep them in Dacca in this heat. He was, therefore, wanting to know from me if there was any cooler place of higher altitude in East Bengal where he could keep his wife and children. He had just left my room when you came in; and who could give better information about East Bengal and Sylhet than *you*? I, therefore, wanted to know from you all about these places. And you possibly thought that I was thinking of ceding these areas to East Bengal, and then you spoke to Gandhiji"—with that he gave a big pinch to my arm. "As you know now nothing could be further from my thoughts. I shall write to Gandhiji, but go and tell him all that I have told you"—(words are mine). All that I could say was that I was extremely sorry and ashamed. I told him that I am never a man given to suspicions; but in the extraordinary times and circumstances in which we were living, I had been subjected to unfounded doubts and fears. I told him how grateful I was for the frank manner in which he explained the matter to me. I could not meet Gandhiji; but I wrote to him to say how great was Lord Mountbatten and how small I was, and what a fool I had been to trouble him with my doubts and fears.

I was in the course of some of my visits during this time, that I perceived the inner agony from which he was suffering on account of the division of India, and the crimes that followed thereon. In one of those moments Bapuji uttered: "Who wants me now?" I felt a sort of dart in my heart and came out with tears in my eyes.

People like us thought that since Independence is come, we would all settle down to the construction of a new India, and of a new province. But it appeared, to my great sorrow, that forces of disruption took possession of the minds of some people more than they had possibly at any time. Selfishness of the worst type seemed to take possession of men, from which even some

Congressmen did not seem to escape. In this province the aftermath of Sylhet transfer and the attendant evils of transfer of the poor clerks rendered the political situation bitter, and not a few letters were received by me threatening my murder by unknown hand. I was feeling perplexed as to what would be the best way to fight these evils—whether by remaining in Government or going out of it; and I wrote a lengthy letter to Bapuji. But a long time after, he wrote back to say that while the conclusion arrived at by me was quite correct, (my desire to resign) he would not hazard any advice as it would amount to a blind man leading the blind, and asked me to approach Kaka Saheb for advice. But what he wrote to me in the end of the letter was of importance. He wrote, "Set apart sometime every morning and pray."

The last time that I saw him was when he was undergoing fast in the Birla House for the pacification of the communal feelings that were creating a wave of crimes in Delhi itself. The facts and the circumstances of this episode are so well known that I do not propose to bring my imperfect knowledge of things to describe the causes and effects of the same. It was 2 o'clock when I arrived at Birla House and directly went to the yard where Gandhiji was lying on the cot in the December sun of New Delhi. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Saheb was discussing with him the conditions under which Gandhiji would be prepared to break his fast. I went and caught hold of his feet for a few seconds and kept standing near his legs for about 10 minutes, while the conversation was going on. He only smiled at me. I had full opportunity of studying his face and the pose in which he lay on the cot. He was speaking in low but distinct tones with usual emphasis. He had the Burma hat given to him by Thakin Nu on his head, and his whole face was aglow with a radiance that I had not seen in him for several months. He was protected from the western sun by Dr. Sushila Nair and some other

ladies. But no body could miss the beaming happiness that was radiating from his face, apparently arising out of divine duty done. Every moment of the talk, however, made me anxious about his condition—it was passing the seventh day of his fast; and I decided not to speak anything, although I came with determination to ask him to break the fast. Immediately after the Maulana had finished, he beckoned me to his side, with a smile which will linger in my memory all the rest of my life. I took one step towards him, and told him that I had nothing to say and, with a *namaskar*, left his side to the place where the Maulana was talking with Dr. Nair and others. I did not listen to the conversation; but all the time I was contemplating on Bapu's fast and the duty that the same imposed on us.

Little could I imagine then that this was the last time that I would have the chance of meeting him. Today I feel an agony in my heart when I feel that I did not go near him even when he beckoned me, although I did so from the tenderest of feelings in me.

It was 6-15 p.m. on the 30th of January when a newspaper correspondent of Shillong asked me on the phone whether I had heard that Gandhi was shot dead while going to prayers! I simply did not believe him, but the next minute and the minute next and so on, did my phone begin to ring, sounding the same ominous query. I now felt it must be real and felt so stunned that I became mute for the time being. I did not really know what to do, where to go! And again came the conviction that it cannot be all true. I then sought a call with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, and, in 5 minutes, I got him to be only told that the light of India and the world had gone out from us for ever!

Is it possible to describe, in words, the void that we are all feeling at this separation? To me, he had always been a force influencing or trying to influence every thought and action of my life. I know that I could

not even expect to live upto what he wished of us; but the very fact that he was looking at us even from a distance, used to inspire us. During the last six years I felt that he infused in me a strength which only a spiritual leader could bless his follower with. His advice was seldom in the nature of "do this, and do that"; but always to inspire me with courage to fight out anything that I consider evil or wrong. I feel and am feeling that he was seeking to develop in me spiritual strength to fight any untruth and wrong. Who else will give me that blessing any more in this life?

## A FATEFUL HOUR

By GOPINATH BARDOLOI

When it was one minute to four I was ushered into the presence of the Cabinet Mission where Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, was also present. Soon after I was seated, I was asked what procedure would suit me most in our conversation—whether I should like to make a sort of a statement or whether I would like to be questioned on the points that they proposed to investigate. I replied that any method would suit me, but perhaps it would be better if I explained my point of view in the nature of a statement and, if the details were left out, the members might be pleased to interrogate and I would give my reply accordingly. They immediately agreed.

I prefaced my statement by saying that the proper authority to negotiate on behalf of the Congress was the Congress President and the Working Committee. Their decision in all matters must be final. I might, however, just try to give my own personal views as a Congressman in reference to these questions.

I said that I was looking at the Government of independent India from the point of my province, and would try to hold before the Mission the picture that I had in my mind. Sir Stafford Cripps added at this point that, although the Congress view would be given by the Congress authority, it might be profitable to view the whole picture from the point of view of the provinces, according to which there may be slight variation, in details, and according to the circumstances prevailing in a particular province.

I then said that what I had in my mind regarding independent India was a sort of constitution that prevailed in the United States. I said that if Mr. Jinnah were reasonable, he would find no difficulty in accepting this proposition. What I meant thereby was that the provinces should have greater autonomy than they were now having, and should have all the residuary powers excepting such as might be left with the Federal Government, such as Defence, Foreign Affairs, Railways, Posts and Telegraphs, Coinage and Customs. At this point, Lord Wavell asked whether I would not like to have agriculture as one of the federal subjects. I said that I may be prepared to accept advice from an advisory body in the Federal Government but agriculture must be a provincial subject. Some one asked whether the same should not apply regarding education. I replied that there also the provinces would welcome the assistance of the Government of India, but I was not prepared to accept the whole of education as a federal subject. I said that, in order to fulfil these functions, the Federal Government should have powers of taxation, and this burden should be shared by the provinces as evenly as possible. In times of war and famine and other emergency, the Centre should have authority to obtain extraordinary powers to deal with them.

The provinces must necessarily enjoy larger autonomy than they enjoy now, with the exception of the powers which may be given to the Centre. They may be considered to be almost independent States enjoying sovereignty in respect of all non-federal subjects. These States (provinces), as far as possible, should be distributed on linguistic and cultural basis and, I said, I would like to discuss, in greater detail, about their status and their powers when I should be dealing with the province of Assam.

I felt (I said) that with the provinces functioning as above Mr. Jinnah should find no difficulty in accepting such a scheme. His present point of view is that his

provinces (Pakistan) should first disintegrate in the beginning and then if he finds it convenient he would join the Federation afterwards. This appears to me to be extremely unreasonable. There is no necessity for reversing a historical process. Provinces are now already united under an all-power Centre: the process should be one of limiting the powers of the Centre and increasing the powers of the provinces, instead of a complete separation. With the redistribution of provinces, there might be certain blocs of territory which may be populated by a preponderating number of Muslims and, if some such provinces take into their mind to combine with one another, Mr. Jinnah might get what he has so long sought for. In my opinion, this is the farthest limit to which Mr. Jinnah's Pakistan can be admitted to have any sense or meaning. And, if such a state of things is not acceptable to Mr. Jinnah, we must be prepared to do without him.

The next point is how this is to be brought about, and I want to emphasize in this connection that powers must be immediately transferred to the hands of the people without a moment's delay. Any delay in this move is fraught with dire consequences to the Britishers as to all. According to my idea, if Mr. Jinnah agrees to set up such an *interim* Government in the Centre, it is well and good. But even if he does not agree, the British Government should not allow the obstructionist tactics of Mr. Jinnah to prevail and hold up the advance of the entire country in its peaceful attempt to secure its freedom. Indian public opinion has been quite clear that any hesitation on the part of the British Government to transfer powers immediately will be construed as an attempt on the part of the British Government to play between the communities in India with a view to preventing India's attaining her freedom by peaceful negotiation.

I then proceeded to point out that in eight provinces, the Congress will assume charge of the administra-

tion. The mass of people in these provinces had demonstrated their faith in the Congress ideology in unmistakable terms, and the Punjab, although not a fully Congress province, is likely to fall in line with the Congress provinces with reference to their demand for Independence. With the exception of Bengal and Sind where Muslim League may have their Government, the rest of British India to-day is represented by the Congress. About 28 crores of people out of 32 crores of British Indians, can definitely be asserted to share the Congress view and the Congress ideology. In my opinion, if an *interim* Government on the basis of an agreed formula between Mr. Jinnah and the Congress is not possible, the only other way by which the provisional Government could be set up, would be to allow the provinces to submit a panel of names from which the Viceroy will make his choice for appointment as members of the provisional free government of India. This provisional government should take over all the powers of the Government of India and the British Government, and that the British Government should make it unequivocally clear that all powers, hitherto enjoyed by the Government of India, will be exercised by this provisional body. Thus, this provisional Government must have powers to settle the differences with the Muslim League, negotiate with the Indian States for the formation of a future government of India, to settle the question of minority and do all that is necessary to settle the preliminaries of the future government of India. They must, of course, have the right to convene the Constituent Assembly which will ultimately frame the Constitution of India. At this point, one of the members of Mission enquired whether the panel of names submitted would be by election by the Legislature of the Province. I said that it was not necessary: the Provincial Government would be the proper authority to select the names. (I think Lord Pethic Lawrence remarked that Provincial Government being fully representative of the Provincial Legislature, the Provincial Government might do the

function). I stated in that connection that, in view of the necessity of having the best type of men in this provisional government,—men with vision and large-heartedness—the selected persons need not necessarily belong to the province which nominates them. Questions were asked by Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Pethic Lawrence and the Viceroy as to whether it would be possible to have minorities represented by this process. I said that it was possible to do so if all the provinces had combined in making the selection.

Some discussions took place in reference to the Constituent Assembly. Sir Stafford Cripps asked how it was proposed to be constituted. I suggested that 10 per cent of the existing members of all the Provincial Assemblies might form themselves into that body. I, of course, added in that connection that, although selection of the members of the Constituent Assembly by adult franchise would have been the best procedure, it need not be resorted to on account of the delay that will involve in that process and the necessity of settling up that body without any loss of time. Lord Pethic Lawrence questioned whether the selection on the basis of 10 per cent from the members of the Assembly would not give an unwieldy body. Sir Stafford Cripps said that the number would be about 200. I said that this body would have to distribute themselves into various committees to deal with a variety of questions that will arise in connection with the constitution-making. They may start their work with a plenary session which would form committees, and a plenary session also may confirm or modify the recommendations made by the various committees.

In reference to this body also, questions were asked whether it would not be possible to have representatives sent to it from the minorities. I said there would be no difficulty. As far as I remember the Viceroy questioned whether it would be possible to find representatives from the tribals also. I replied that so far as my province was

concerned, a tribal Christian, Rev. J. J. M. Nichols-Roy, was a member of our Cabinet and might very adequately represent the tribals of Assam. He had sent a memorandum with me which I handed over, saying that that document might give some idea of the hopes and aspirations of the people of the hills of Assam in reference to the constitutional changes that they were envisaging.

The next point that I mentioned was in reference to the particular problems of the province of Assam in the perfection of a free India. I emphasized in that connection that Mr. Jinnah's claim to include Assam into Pakistan was absolutely impossible and preposterous. He might as well expect the moon to come down to him; but he could never have Assam in his Pakistan. Of all the provinces of India, Assam (with Sylhet excluded) was the only territory which had never come under the subjection of any powers from outside. Assam's history can be traced to the days of the *Mahabharata* and even beyond. King Bhagadutta of Kamarupa is said to have come to the battle of Kurukshetra with a hundred thousand elephants. During the historical period beginning from the second century A.D. till the thirteenth century, the boundaries of Assam extended from the borders of the present day Bihar to Sadiya, the easternmost point in the continent of India. When the Pathans and the Mughals established their *Subas* in eastern Bengal they came into conflict with the ruling dynasties of Assam—the Koches and the Ahoms. They led as many as 17 expeditions between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries and, on each occasion, they were driven from the borders of Assam after signal defeat. It was only at the time of the Burmese invasion when feuds in the royal family broke out and, as a result of it, the British were invited to Assam to be relieved from Burmese atrocities. It was from this time that independence of Assam ceased. Thus, Assam had functioned as an independent unit throughout the pages of history with her own customs and manners, and her language and culture. The dis-

district of Sylhet apparently was under the influence of Bengali culture, and it seems it was an important Muslim centre of the *Suba* of Bengal towards the end of the seventeenth century. The Congress had already accepted the principle of the distribution of the provinces on linguistic and cultural basis and, according to the present arrangements, Sylhet is included in the Congress province of Bengal. As a matter of fact, the British Government included Sylhet within the districts of Assam only as a matter of administrative convenience. When they were united, the people of Sylhet raised an intensive agitation against their separation from Bengal, and this agitation was carried on till lately. In 1924, the Assam Legislative Council passed a resolution demanding the separation of Sylhet from Assam and amalgamation of it with Bengal. A similar resolution was also passed two years afterwards by the same Council as a result of the Government of India's direction to the effect that, the 1924 resolution not being passed by a sufficient majority, it should again be considered by the Council. In the same year in 1926, the Bengal Council also passed a resolution to the same effect. The matter was discussed also in the Central Legislative Assembly as well as in the Council of State. At the present time, Muslims seem to be opposed to the separation of Sylhet and its amalgamation with Bengal. They seem to think that the opportunities they are getting in the percentage of service, in the membership to the Legislatures, etc. will be curtailed if the separation would take place. The secret intention of the Muslim League is to attempt to convert their present percentage of population—38.7 per cent—into one of majority by introduction of Muslim population from Western Bengal into Assam by forceful trespasses and all manner of atrocious activities. The question of separation of Sylhet as well as the land settlement question in Assam have assumed the bitterest dimension since after the Muslim League had declared its intention to include Assam within the eastern zone of Pakistan. On administrative ground also, some bitterness is develop-

ing on account of its rivalry that is going on between the people of the two valleys over questions of services, utilization of Government funds for establishing and running institutions—often times leading to prevention of good and benevolent projects coming to fulfilment. It is also the complaint of the people of the Assam Valley that Sylhet being a deficit district was maintained from the revenues derived from the cultivators of the Assam Valley. Lord Wavell questioned at this stage how that could be so. The reply given by me was that Sylhet being a permanently settled district, revenues derived from it must considerably be lesser than from the *raiatory* districts of the Assam Valley. Some questions were also put by the Viceroy regarding the availability of surplus land in the Assam Valley. I pointed out that it was entirely a false propaganda by the Muslim League. The figures given by the Agriculture Department have been made out only by a method of subtraction from the actual total area of the province minus the lands that have been brought under cultivation. The waste land shown, therefore, includes lands in the hills, beds of rivers, and extensive fallows which remain under water for most part of the year on account of the peculiar topographical situation of the plains of the Assam Valley. The Viceroy again argued that there might be some lands near the borders of the hills. I pointed out that, if there were any, it did not fall within the included areas; and even for bringing such lands under cultivation one shall have to go through long and tedious process of irrigation and other expenditure not possible to cope with under provincial finance. Taking all these facts into consideration, I told the Mission that the Province of Assam should be reconstituted on linguistic and cultural basis in terms of the Congress ideology, with the district of Sylhet taken away from her boundaries. At this stage, Lord Pethic Lawrence raised the point: if Bengal comes under Pakistan, how could Assam have access to the rest of India? I replied that my proposition did not admit of Pakistan at any stage so as to exclude the right of inter-

provincial communication. But even if it were to be so assumed, the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling are Hindu majority districts and contiguous to the Bihar district of Purnea. These districts could not go under Pakistan. They may either be tagged to Bihar or Assam; at any rate, they be treated as neutral territory to which all States should have free access.

I then proceeded to point out that Assam, of all the provinces, felt the necessity of larger autonomy and more powers for her internal administration than it had been her lot to secure hitherto. Assam has always been left in cold neglect by the Government of India. Although oil and petrol are produced in her own land, she gets but a small contribution from the Centre as her share. As much as 280 million pounds of tea are produced, in the average, in the tea gardens of Assam, but we have not been favoured with any contribution from the Centre on that account. In other respects also, such as Central Services, etc. Assam is very shabbily treated. The result has been that, although an autonomous province, it has not got even a good college for scientific education for her students; it has not got a medical college; no engineering college and no university of her own. It does not possess its own High Court. The grant of 30 lacs of subvention is extremely small, when her wants are taken into account. During the second world war, it bore the brunt of it more than any other province in India and yet the attention given to her aspiration for development suffer under serious handicap and neglect at the hands of the Government of India. Assam, as all other provinces, must have full control over all her resources subject to some suitable contribution for maintenance of the Centre and, so far as her internal administration was concerned, she should have the fullest freedom.

Next question which about the Mission and the Viceroy seemed to be particularly anxious was in reference to the Hill tribes of Assam. The Viceroy seemed to be particularly interested in this problem and the questions asked

mostly came from him. I pointed out that all hill tribal areas in the province and even near about the province of Assam must come within the provincial administration. The present arrangement is entirely defective inasmuch as administration in these areas is done by the Governor who exercises those functions on behalf of the Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy. I suggested that this system must automatically cease and these areas should come within the administration of free Assam. I pointed out that, in the case of more advanced hill tribes, we are prepared to give (as the Congress manifesto shows) some kind of autonomy in their internal administration, as in the case of the Khasi States and Khasi and Jaintia people and also in the State of Manipur. These States must function within the province just in the same way as municipalities or local bodies function within the administration. These areas should, of course, be allowed to send their representatives to the provincial legislature. What other relationship these areas should bear to the provincial Government must be matters of detail and, in my opinion, should be worked out to the satisfaction of the parties concerned. The Viceroy enquired about the tribes in the northern side of the Brahmaputra. I said that they were surely not as advanced as those in the Khasi or Jaintia Hills. In times, previous to the British rule, we have some instances when they would swoop down the plains and carry raids in the villages. Such activities could easily be prevented by the provincial militia, the analogy of which can now be found in the Reserved Police and in the Assam Rifles. We also feel that the civilizing methods adopted by the provincial administration will soon remove the raiding motives from the minds of some tribes. The Viceroy questioned whether these tribes could have only improvement in their position with what revenues are derived from these areas. I, of course, replied that even now the province was paying a large portion of their expenditure from revenues derived from other parts of the province. I commented in that connection on the signal neglect of

the British rulers regarding advancement of these tribes. It was only at the time of the Congress Coalition Government that Tura, the headquarters of the Garo Hills district and Jowai, the headquarters of the Jaintia people, got a high school each for their education. Not to speak of any higher education, the ordinary literacy in all the hills except the Khasi and Jaintia and Lushai Hills, is extremely low. Questioned by Sir Stafford Cripps, I said that we should surely be glad to spend money for their uplift in every possible way.

Many other minor points were asked and discussed but it is not necessary to put them all.

In the end I put a plain question to them, enquiring their intentions regarding the 'Independence of India'. Lord Pethic Lawrence replied that they were doing their best to bring about a union of all the peoples and communities to whom they could transfer their powers. They were not carrying on this investigation with any spirit of imposing their own will upon the people of India but were doing so in discharge of their obligation which the long association of Britain and India had naturally brought on them.\*

\*A resume prepared by Lokapriya Bardoloi of the conversation he had with the British Cabinet Mission and then Viceroy, Lord Wavell, on April 1, 1946 from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m.

## CHAPTER VI

## DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

[More than three decades have elapsed since Assam had the privilege of the first visit of a person who today occupies the highest position in the Indian Republic as the head of the State. That distinguished person is Dr. Rajendra Prasad. In 1922 when Assam, with the rest of India, was passing through the agony of Government repressive measures in the wake of the non-cooperation movement, Dr. Rajendra Prasad (then Babu Rajendra Prasad) came to Assam for the first time. His was a mission to collect facts about the atrocities perpetrated by the Britishers on the people whose only crime,—if it was a crime to love one's country—was to agitate for freedom from an alien rule. The assignment was entrusted to him by the Congress. In his first tour of Assam, Dr. Prasad had to visit remote villages, and in that he had, of course, to use bullock carts while negotiating part of his journey. The villagers, who were subjected to the severest form of molestations by the agents of an alien rule, were very much heartened to find in their midst a person like Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

Two years later, Dr. Rajendra Prasad re-visited Assam. His second visit was entirely in connection with organizational work of the Congress, especially Khadi. He walked from village to village in some of the districts.

His third visit took place when he came to attend the session of the Indian National Congress in 1926 at Pandu (Gauhati).

As the President of the Indian Republic, Dr. Prasad paid a brief visit to this State in 1950 to convey, personally, his sympathy to a disconsolate people in their very great sufferings in the Earthquake of August

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

15, 1950, preceded by the grievous loss in the sudden death of their Chief Minister, Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi. He desired to visit Assam in 1953 with a view to meeting the people but the proposed visit had to be abandoned on account of his indisposition. His desire to come to Assam however remained irresistible. The people including the tribals were also eager to see the President in their midst. It was in the early part of 1954 that Dr. Prasad fulfilled his desire and visited Goalpara, Garo Hills, Gauhati, Digboi, Tinsukia, Dibrugarah, Margherita and Imphal.

During these five visits, Dr. Rajendra Prasad showed his discernment into the affairs of Assam, as though he was one of the people. His impressions about the State, its people and some of its earlier problems are vividly given in his Hindi autobiography, *Mare Atmakatha*, from which two relevant articles are reproduced here in English. The two articles reveal very interesting personal reminiscences of Dr. Rajendra Prasad in regard to Assam.

In his monumental book, *India Divided*, Dr. Prasad has devoted a considerable part of the book to a discussion about the fantastic claim on Assam by the protagonists of Pakistan during the hectic days of the Muslim League. His analysis of the composition of Assam's population and the impact of immigration into Assam of the land-hungry East Bengalee Muslim cultivators, commonly known as Mymensighias, on the political trends, economy, even social structure of the State is a manifestation of his intimate knowledge and interest in the affairs of the Assamese and their land.]

## GOVERNMENT REPRESSION IN ASSAM

BY DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

After Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, the Government repression was in full swing in some of the Provinces. All the prominent leaders, except Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Sri Vithalbhai Patel were in Prison. The people were greatly upset on account of Government's repressive measures. It was necessary to keep the Congress functioning. The responsibilities of those few people who were outside the jails were great. Pandit Malaviya, on receipt of the news of repression of the severest type decided to visit Assam. I also accompanied him. The Congress committees were formed not only in the district towns but also in the villages of the Province. In Assam, the houses are mostly thatched. The Congress Committee offices were also in thatched houses. The Government officials burnt down the Congress houses almost in all places. The staunch workers were put under arrest, and the members of the Congress *Seva Dal* courted imprisonment.

On arrival in Assam, we saw everything. Immediately we made up our mind to tour the whole Province. This was the first opportunity for Malaviyaji as well as for me to visit Assam. The Province is very charming, rich in flowers and fruits—the mighty Brahmaputra and the Hills adding to the unique beauty. The thick and giant trees as well as the creepers also greatly enhance its beauty. It was rather difficult, in some places, to carry on cultivation and also to visit those places, on account of wild animals, particularly elephants and tigers. The province was undoubtedly most picturesque but it was infected with malaria, as many areas remained submerged under water. At Gauhati, Malaviyaji delivered a very inspiring speech. He appealed to

the people to carry on thir campaign against opium. I also spoke a few words. In the presence of Malaviya himself at the meeting, few had anything more to say. It was not possible for both of us to go together to all the places within the time at our disposal. So, we split up into two batches. Malaviyaji, accompanied by a batch of volunteers, started for those places which it was possible to visit by train or steamer. With some other volunteers I left on a tour of the places to which bullock-cart was the only means of transport. I liked it. For it provided for me an opportunity to know the actual situation in the villages. At the same time, Malaviyaji could avoid undertaking a tour by bullock-cart in his very old age. He was over sixty years at the time. We hurried to those localities where the wheel of repression was in full swing.

I had to pass through a jungle in the course of my journey to a certain place. I was surprised to find that in Assam villages, Bihari porters were working; the carters were also Biharis. I had my bath in the Brahmaputra river. Incidentally I saw a few boats there. From their talks which were in Chapra dialect, I learnt they were men from Bihar. On inquiry I knew they hailed from the district of Chapra and were professional boatmen. The sweetmeat vendors in a steamer nearby were also persons from Bihar. We negotiated 15 to 16 miles from Gauhati in a motor lorry. From there we had to walk for about twenty miles. The track passed through a jungle. I do not remember the name of the place\*. We reached that place at 2 p.m. I thought that, had we walked faster we might have covered most part of the jungle. We hired two bullock-carts; but the carters delayed our start on some plea or other, until it was five in the evening. I came to know, on inquiry, that the carts could ply fast in the night as the day time was very hot. One volunteer

\*The name of the place is Boko, inhabited by Plains tribals, Bodos, 34 miles from Gauhati in the south bank of the Brahmaputra.

and myself took seats in a cart, while in another there were two or three other volunteers. We had nothing to eat. At 8 p.m. we reached a good place where a large number of carts were parking. We searched for something to eat and got some fried grams. I began to chew them and fell asleep. After a few hours some noise woke me up. I noticed that the volunteers were sounding two kerosene-oil tins, and were also singing and shouting. With him the carter too was shouting and driving his bullocks. Two hurricane lamps were lit up in both the carts. The track seemed to be narrower as we were proceeding. On either side there were thick forests and hills. As it was night, I could not see these distinctly. On my return journey, however, I saw them well. On a query, I came to know tigers used to frequent that track. It was to frighten tigers that the kerosene-oil tins were sounded. They informed me that tigers did not come near on account of the sound on the road. The sound would keep them away should they ever be on the road. But some of the beasts were so ferocious that they even snatched away bullocks from the carts. I was told such an incident had taken place only a few days back. After this I could not sleep.\*

\*English rendering from Dr. Rajendra Prasad's autobiography, (in Hindi), *Mare Almakatha*.

## MY VISIT TO ASSAM

### MY VISIT TO ASSAM

BY DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

Among those from Assam who had come to attend the Kanpur session of the Congress, Sri Nabin Chandra Bardoloi was prominent. He was already known to me as a friend. I had my close acquaintance with him while both of us were practising in the Calcutta High Court. He joined the Non-cooperation movement from its very beginning. The Assam delegates had a keen desire to invite a session of the Congress. They sought my advice. I discouraged them; for what I saw in the Gaya session of the Congress, I felt the holding of a Congress session was nothing short of a huge affair. Assam was a very small province. It was difficult to raise funds; for Assam was not merely a small province but she was poor also. Most Congressmen had the idea that Assam comprised only those areas where Assamese was spoken, i.e. areas on either bank of the Brahmaputra. The Bengali-speaking areas were known as the Surma Valley; the latter was apparently considered to be part of Bengal. This being taken into consideration, the Province looked still smaller. The number of workers was also not large. Despite all these, Assam Congressmen's enthusiasm appeared irresistible. They did not listen to my advice. And the Congress was invited.

They desired that, before the Congress session had actually met, Khadi work should be re-organized. Already there was some work of Khadi; but later, it did not go well for want of active workers. So, it had to be abandoned. Afterwards, they approached me for help. I could not refuse, and I promised to come there. A few days later, I left for Assam. I visited the places where Khadi work could be possible. I gathered a good deal of experience in this tour. Assam is a very good place for

Khadi, because in no other provinces there were so much facilities for Khadi work as in Assam. Even now, rearing of *eri* and *muga* and spinning yarn out of them are widely prevalent. The womanfolk of Assam are expert weavers as our womanfolk are in sewing. A girl of a good family is seldom given in marriage if she is not accomplished in weaving and spinning. Weaving is not of ordinary variety; they know to weave cloths of various designs and colour in their own looms. They weave fine *saris* with beautiful borders. Almost every family possesses a loom. The looms are made of bamboo. Besides weaving, they know spinning. I was greatly impressed and delighted to see all these. I wish I could exchange our yarn for Assam's cloth. In Darbhanga in our Province, yarn could be exchanged for cloth. Similar exchange should be possible in Assam also, because each home possesses a *charka* and a loom. We get our yarn from some women spinners which is exchanged for cloth from weavers. There is no need in Assam for this exchange system. In certain areas of Assam, cotton is also grown. The cotton is not of very good quality. However it does serve the purpose. So, it appeared that there were sufficient facilities for me to carry on Khadi work. I recommended to the Charkha Sangha to allot some funds for Assam in order that intensive work could be carried. The Secretary did not approve of it, because he had very little idea about it. Later, he had the Committee, on my advice, allotted some funds. Work then started in an organized manner.

During my tour, another thing struck me. I saw extensive waste lands in the Nowgong district as I was touring in the villages there. Assam's soil being very fertile, good fodder grow on the lands. I saw also hut-

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

ments here and there with sparse population. No crops were grown nor any trace of cultivation could be seen. These fallow lands were available. Under the prevailing laws, it was easy for any person to settle there and acquire land with rights of occupancy. Some people from the neighbouring district (Mymensingh) in Bengal came there due to pressure of land and thick population and used to live in small huts. They used to reclaim those lands. Thus, they acquired rights over the lands. They were mostly Muslims. In this way the immigrant Muslims inflated the Muslim population of the province. On inquiry I knew that whosoever had migrated to Assam could obtain land, no matter which province they belonged to. I recalled to my mind then that the population in Bihar, specially in the district of Chapra, was increasing to such an extent and put such a pressure on land that lakhs of people had to go every year to work as labourers. A few thousands of those people should have come to Assam. They used to earn some money as labourers and then return to Bihar after a few months. In the course of my tour, I met many of them. I could recognize them from their language and manners. I knew the name of their villages also when I talked with them. I felt it was better for them to settle permanently, instead of coming periodically; because the railway fare that was necessary for a visit to Assam was sufficient for them to buy a plot of land.

I discussed this matter with the local people. They approved of this, as Bihari labourers were known to them well. They liked the Biharis. The people from Mymensingh were not welcome. The Assamese people did not like the Mymensinghias because of the latter's behaviour with the local people. Some preferred Hindu labourers

to those from Mymensingh. The local people felt it was good for them if the Muslim population was not on the increase. Another reason was that the Muslim population was augmenting itself gradually. The waste lands were spread over in the areas inhabited by the indigenous people. They feared Muslims would encroach on these lands thereby enlarging the Muslim population. The Assamese themselves were however unable to reclaim all the available waste land. In the circumstances, it was in the interest of the Assamese people if the Biharis would settle there. On my return to Bihar, I discussed with some of my friends as to the laws for acquiring land. But few people had come to Assam. As far as I could learn, only a handful of Biharis had lands in Assam. I talked over this matter with my elder brother. A few years later, he came to inspect the lands in Assam. He wanted to take some cultivable land in addition to waste land. He, along with late Babu Sambhucharan and Babu Anugrah Narayan, purchased a plot of land measuring about 1,000 acres from a Bengalee gentleman at a few thousands of rupees. I was told the plot was good. There was an orange garden. For reclamation work, a tractor was there; a bungalow too. The plot was surrounded by jungles on all sides. Elephants, tigers and other wild beasts used to roam about the locality. However, it was decided to bring that plot under plough. A pair of bullocks were also purchased. But the climate of the place was so bad that whoever had come there suffered from malaria. Perhaps, the cause which compelled the former landlord to sell out the land was this very fact. My brother came there several times. Anugrah Babu and Sambhu Babu also visited the place. I never came there. Though they themselves were there, the plot could not be properly reclaimed. After a

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

few years, my elder brother re-visited the place, but he had eventually to return home, being laid up with malaria. Gradually, his health broke down and ultimately fell a victim to it. Sambhu Babu had already died. Thereafter, none could retain their enthusiasm. We abandoned the land. Perhaps Government sold out the land on account of arrears in land revenue. We incurred heavy loss in terms of money there. Only Mahendra Singh Babu and Ramrakshya Brahmachari had reclaimed some areas which still belong to some of their successors. This brief account does not relate to one year but to seven to eight years. I understand the tenancy laws in Assam have since undergone some changes, and outsiders cannot so easily obtain land. Most of the lands are now kept as reserves for the indigenous people, and laws have been enacted to that effect.\*

## CHAPTER VII

### JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

[Sri Nehru has visited Assam several times. His first visit was in the year 1937. He was the Congress President. His visit was of a hurricane nature. In a sense it was somewhat exciting too for him as well as for the people of Assam. Sri Nehru was himself exceedingly charmed with what he saw in the course of his tour being the first in the series. He wrote two articles while he was travelling in the train in Assam, narrating his impressions of the tour. His accounts were really masterpieces, as all writings of Sri Nehru always are.

His second visit took place in 1941. The time was rather unusual. The second world war was in progress; the Japanese troops were on the offensive then and were overrunning Burma almost in a lightning manner. Most of the Indians in Burma, (and their number was not small) were forced to leave that country. Normal communications being at standstill the Burma evacuees had to trek their way to Assam through upper Burma by all inconceivable means of communications. The evacuees in their thousands had to pass through Assam. Train-loads of evacuees and the camps where they were given succour presented pitiable sights. Sri Nehru, as Congress President, heard all about the hardships and distress of these unfortunate victims of war. Therefore he personally came to Assam to see what relief could be arranged for these evacuees.

Sri Nehru's third visit to Assam was in 1945. It was a General Election time. The election was held under the old Constitution. Assam's case was then very critical. A Muslim League Ministry aided by the European tea planters—both henchmen of an alien rule—was then in power. To conceive of a Congress victory in

\*English rendering from Dr. Rajendra Prasad's autobiography, (in Hindi), *Marc Almakatha*.

Assam in the prevailing circumstances to ensure a Congress Ministry was very difficult, if not impossible. But Sri Nehru's visit proved very effective. And the first time in this State, a full-fledged Congress Government was installed. The event was very significant. Had not the Congress captured power in Assam in 1946, the course of the succeeding events would have been quite different for Assam and probably for India also as a whole.

In 1950, Sri Nehru again visited Assam. He came as the Prime Minister of India. His visit was occasioned by the Great Earthquake of 1950. Obviously it was not a happy occasion.

His next visit was in connection with the General Election of 1951. He came in his capacity as the Congress President. He touched the principal towns of the State, but could not visit the rural areas.

Sri Nehru visited the tribal areas in 1953. For the first time, he could come in contact with most of the tribes in Assam. He went to the North-East Frontier Agency, and visited Naga Hills, Manipur and the Lushai Hills. One important feature of the tour was that the Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu was with him.

In the following pages are reproduced some of his writings and speeches which bear special reference to Assam.]

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## IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

BY JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Eight days are an all too brief period for the Assam Valley, and yet this was all I gave to it, and then I sped away to another beautiful valley. During these eight days I visited many towns, villages and had a glimpse of the rich variety of this province and of hospitable people who inhabit it. I loved the uncommn combination of semi-tropical scenery and snow-topped mountains with a noble river running between them. Everywhere I had the warmest of welcomes, and I am deeply grateful to all classes and peoples for their exceeding courtesy. That courtesy was extended to me by European and Indian alike, and even the railway authorities gave every facility for my travelling. But above all I rejoiced to experience the love and goodwill of the masses who came in such large numbers to meet me and hear me. Throughout my tour I was enveloped and stimulated by the abundance of this affection, and I shall remember it with joy and gratitude. I shall carry away with me also, imprinted on my mind, the silent beauty of the dawn as we sailed over the bosom of the Brahmaputra and the snow-covered peaks in the distance caught the first rays of the rising sun.

Many places I visited and saw, but there was one notable exception. I am sorry I could not go to Shillong. I am sorry also that I could not visit the tribal areas. I met, however, many of the members of these tribes—Khasis, Kacharis, Ravas, Garos, Lalungs, Mikirs, Miris, and Nagas—and was attracted by them and by the bright faces of their children. They deserve every help and sympathy from Congressmen, and I hope they will receive it.

Rush tours like mine involve a great deal of organizing and give much trouble to those in charge of them. This burden fell naturally on my comrades of the Congress, and I must express my deep gratitude to them for all they did. The Congress is a living vital force in Assam, as I saw and felt everywhere I went during these eight days, but the organizational side has been somewhat neglected, and so the province has not pulled its full weight in the past. I hope and believe that this deficiency will be made good now and the great enthusiasm of the people will be organized and disciplined to right ends.

I came up against particular problems affecting Assam and exercising the minds of the people of the province, and yet all these were secondary before the major problem of India—the poverty of the people, and this was terribly in evidence in the province. It is this problem of poverty and that of Swaraj and national freedom that overshadow all local problems and we must always remember this if we are to retain a proper perspective and work effectively. In a sense Assam is fortunate; for the very fact that it has been somewhat neglected and its development has been slow opens out promising vistas of rapid development on a planned basis, greater production of wealth *and a rising* standard of living for her people.

*Elsewhere* in India I have seldom had this sense of latent power and resources which the jungles and unoccupied spaces of Assam have given me. The place cries aloud for the mind and the hand of man to develop it, but this can only be for the public good if it is organized and planned and deliberately aims at the betterment of the masses.

Among the various local problems that the people of Assam think about there are: Opium, the future of Sylhet, immigration and the Line System, the tea gardens, and more especially the labour employed there, and the excluded and partially excluded areas with the

various tribal folk inhabiting them. Then there is that precious commodity, oil, more valuable in the modern world than gold.

The opium question of Assam has for long years excited the attention of all India and even of other parts of the world. The Government, while expressing appreciation of public sentiment, has resisted it also in its desire to cling on the opium revenue. Yet it is true that the opium consumption has gone down considerably and with it the revenue. Probably it could have been stamped out almost completely if the Government had pursued a more rigorous policy during the past dozen years or more. There is a tendency now, I was told, to issue licences for opium in increasing numbers to almost everyone who applies for them and the age limit of fifty is seldom enforced. The time has certainly come when a more vigorous and effective policy should be pursued and the issue of licences should be a rarity and only for definite medical reasons. It should be possible to reduce opium consumption almost to vanishing point within two or three years. There is a danger of opium smuggling increasing, but I think this is magnified and can be checked. There is probably more smuggling going on now via the Indian States in Rajputana and Central India than across the border. But this smuggling is still small compared to the authorized sale of opium.

There seems also to be a tendency on the part of the Government to increase its liquor revenue to replace its diminishing income from opium. This must be checked or else one evil will give place to another.

The future of the Surma Valley is a living question in Assam, and the Assamese are keenly desirous that Sylhet should be transferred to the administrative province of Bengal, so as to leave them an area which is linguistically more homogenous. The people of Sylhet, I found, were equally in favour of this change and, on the face of it, the desire is reasonable. Sylhet is not only

linguistically Bengali, but its economy is more allied to that of Bengal than of Assam proper. There is the permanent settlement there, as in Bengali, while in Assam peasant proprietors, with a varying assessment, are usually to be found.

The Congress has all along laid stress on a linguistic division of provinces. This corresponds with cultural areas, and it is far easier for the people of such an area to develop educationally and otherwise on the basis of their mother tongue. Indeed, the Surma Valley has long formed part of the Congress province of Bengal. Thus it is clear that, so far as the Congress is concerned, there is no doubt as to what the future of Sylhet should be—it should go to Bengal. I feel, however, that we have to face to-day far more important and vital problems, and next few years are pregnant with the possibilities of vast changes. There we should not spend our energy too much on trying to bring about the small changes, which, however desirable, do not affect the main issue. We should certainly press for these relatively minor changes, but always looking at them in the proper perspective and not losing ourselves in them. When the big changes come, as come they must, the other will follow rapidly.

Immigration and the Line System is a far more vital problem of Assam. I hesitate to give detailed opinion on this issue as it requires expert knowledge which I do not claim to possess. Pre-eminently it is a question to be considered by experts, economists and others. And yet there are some considerations which seem to me to govern this question. It is right that the basic consideration should be the development of Assam and the betterment of the people of Assam. But Assam cannot be isolated from the rest of India, nor can any artificial barriers be put between them. Even laws cannot for long override economic factors. Assam is partly an undeveloped province with a relatively sparse population, while on two sides of it are thickly populated areas

with land-hungry masses. It is true that large parts of Assam are mountainous country and some other parts are liable to periodic floods. Still there is plenty of room for development, and at present there is a want of equilibrium between Assam and the surrounding provinces, and this will always result in economic forces seeking to restore an equilibrium. These realities or these forces cannot be ignored, but if they are properly understood and directed to right ends, we can ultimately produce an equilibrium which is for the benefit and advancement of the people of Assam.

It seems to me that throwing the unoccupied land open to unrestricted immigration without any planning or recognized end in view will be peculiarly unfortunate. We have a sufficiency and more of difficult land problems in India, indeed they are the major problems of the country, and it would be folly to add to them in Assam. Assam is fortunate in being in a position to carry out large schemes of land reform without coming up against vested interests which are difficult to dislodge. For a Government to create fresh vested interests is to add to its own difficulties and tie its own hands and feet, as well as to encumber the next generation.

It is generally believed now that land reform should move in the direction of large collective farms or State farms. The Assam Government has a fine opportunity to work to this end. Instead of just allowing odd people to get parcels of land and cultivate them as they will in individualistic way, it should start large State farms and try to develop collectives. Assam-born people should be given preference in these, but immigrants should certainly be accepted. The capital for these undertakings should be raised, if necessary, by loan. It will be a profitable investment. Such State farms and collectives should work out a planned scheme of land reform in the whole province and begin by giving effect to it in their own areas. With success in these areas,

the scheme can easily be extended to other parts of the province.

I do not know if the present Government of Assam has vision enough and can think or act in these terms. Probably not. In any event, nothing should be done which might come in the way of such development in the future. If land is to be allotted to individuals it should be given on specific conditions, such as no right of sale or mortgage and the State to have the right to organize collectives when it so desires. To give the right of sale or mortgage will result in the building up of large estates. This, as well as speculation in land, has to be avoided. The parcel of land allotted should not be too small to be uneconomic for a family and not too large to convert the holder into a landlord subsisting on the labour of others. The size can be fixed after local enquiry. In allotting land, preference should be given to Assam-born people, and promising immigrants should then be welcomed.

The present Line System seems to me obviously a transitional affair which cannot continue as such for long. To remove it suddenly and leave the field open to unrestricted immigration would result in producing all manner of entanglements and future problems. To keep it as it is seems to me undesirable. The principle is bad and we cannot encourage it in India. It is also bad to confine immigrants in a particular area and so prevent them from being assimilated by the people of the province. This results in increasing separatism and hostility between adjoining areas, and a terribly difficult problem is created for future generations. The very basis of immigration must be the assimilation of the immigrant. If he remains an alien and an outsider, he is a disrupting force in the body politic. From a sociological point of view it is admitted now that it is dangerous even to keep colonies of criminals apart, as they deteriorate when they are removed from the healthy

influences of normal social life. They concentrate on their criminality.

The Assamese, however, fear that, instead of assimilating the immigrants, they might be assimilated by them, as they come in such vast numbers. Some comments in the last Census Report, where the immigrants from Eastern Bengal are compared to a "mass movement of a large body of ants" have produced a powerful impression on the mind of the Assamese, and they fear a suppression and almost an extinction of their culture, language, and individuality. Though there is some reason for this apprehension I think it is exaggerated. Culture and individuality in a people do not depend entirely on numbers, but on something more vital. Even small minorities, enveloped by alien and hostile peoples, have retained their culture, language and individuality, and even intensified them. If the Assamese have this vital element in them, as I believe they have, they will not be affected much by large bodies of immigrants coming in. They will influence the latter far more than they will be influenced by them, especially as the immigrants are likely to be of a lower cultural level.

But still, as I have said, it would be undesirable to have unchecked immigration without plan or system. Under a planned development the possible dangers will be avoided and the wealth of Assam will grow and the Assamese people will prosper, while at the same time affording scope for immigrants to come in and so gradually to establish an equilibrium between Assam and the adjoining provinces.

The tea gardens cover a good part of Assam, and the province might indeed be called the Land of Tea. I passed by innumerable such gardens, especially in Upper Assam, and they had a prosperous look about them. A tea garden can be judged to some extent from its external appearance, and I must say that most of these gardens in the upper valley looked clean and efficient, more so than the gardens I had seen some years

ago in Ceylon. The bushes were neat and close together, and their surfaces formed an unbroken and uniform expanse.

But the shine of the shoe is not the test of its fit or the comfort it gives to the wearer. I suppose the garden labourers are not looked upon as the wearers of the shoe in question. But I was more interested in him than in the quality of the tea produced or the dividends of the companies. And the look of these labourers, men and women, was not good and their complaints were many. Some progress has been made, in law at least, from the days when these workers were indentured coolies and practically in bondage. But, in effect, I doubt if the change has made material difference to their lives. They had a hunted look about them, and fear peeped out of their eyes. They were poor, of course.

They have no organization and are not allowed to have any. I am told that outsiders are not encouraged to go to them or to their Lines, and they live more or less secluded lives. They have been given special representation in the Provincial Assembly, but the measure of their helplessness is this that their so-called representatives represent the interests of their employers and always side with them. They dare not elect the people of their choice. This is a deplorable state of affairs, and to remedy this utter helplessness is far more important than some paternal legislation to remove minor grievances. The employers themselves should realize that these primitive labour methods cannot continue, and even their own interests require that labour should be made more self-reliant.

I think the immediate need is for a proper enquiry to be carried out into labour conditions, and the provincial Assembly might well appoint a committee for this purpose, which should go thoroughly into the matter. I hope the employers will co-operate with such committee and give it every facility. Facilities for labour organiza-

tion should also be given and, as such organizations grow up, they should be recognized and encouraged.

I might add that, so far as I was concerned, I had some facilities given to me by the tea garden authorities to meet the labourers. The tea-planters were courteous to me in this and other matters, and I am grateful to them. Large crowds of workers met me at meetings and by the wayside, but during my rush tour I had no time to go deeply into their problems.

I was surprised to learn that the tea companies paid exceedingly little in the way of revenue to the State for the land occupied by them. They pay for less than the ordinary agriculturists. Why this particular favour should be shown to them I do not know. It seems unfair to the State and to the agriculturists.

Vast tracts in Assam are included in the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. The people living here are cut off from the rest of India, and we know little about them. Curiously enough, the Government of India Act of 1935 has widened the gap and made them still more unapproachable. And yet no people in India require more helpful sympathy and co-operation from their countrymen than these tribal folk and other who live cut off from us in these areas. I like these people and feel drawn to them, and I hope the Congress organization and our Provincial Assemblies will do everything in their power to remove their disabilities and to encourage education and industry among them. Here also investigation is needed. Some of the tribal people I met were obviously intelligent and, given the right education and encouragement, would go ahead.

Apart from the tea plantations and oil, modern industry is hardly in evidence in Assam. At Dhubri there is a match factory belonging to the Swedish Match Trust, and this has gained an unenviable notoriety during the past year because of a lock-out and strike. This strike and lock-out lasted for nearly a year, and this long drawn-out struggle is itself evidence of the deep feeling

of grievance among the workers, who had continued their struggle despite hunger and destitution. Their demands were reasonable. It is bad enough that the workers should be starved into submission anywhere, but it is worse that powerful foreign trusts, trying to cloak themselves under the garb of Swadeshi, should thus exploit their workers in India. I think it should be made perfectly clear that the Congress strongly disapproves of this and will try to put an end to it when it has the chance to do so.

There is obviously room for the development of industry in Assam both cottage and large-scale. Weaving is widespread, and every middle-class girl has a loom. An essential part of her training consists in the practical knowledge of weaving. Efforts to teach cottage industries to Harijans and tribal people have met with success, and these could easily be widely extended with excellent results. I saw an efficient little school and ashram run for this purpose by the All-India Harijan Sevak Sangh. The work was limited in scope for lack of funds.

What large-scale industries can be developed in Assam I am not competent to say. Paper-making is evidently one of them, for the forests run wild with bamboos and other plants which are said to be good for the purpose. I was surprised to learn that the tea-planters import their wooden cases for tea from abroad, mostly from Japan, and a vast number of such cases are used. There is a plentiful supply of good wood at their very doorstep and, with suitable machinery, all the wooden cases required can be produced locally with advantage to the province and to the tea industry.

At Digboi one sees the familiar iron derricks against the skyline, and they announce to the visitor that he is entering an outpost of the great Empire of Oil. The Assam Oil Company is associated with the Burma Oil Company, and the two together are parts of the Shell combine. This accumulated wealth of past ages is being

pumped out at Digboi, but Assam, the owner of this wealth, hardly profits, for the royalties go to the Central revenues of India. This is unfair to the people of Assam, and there is an agitation against it which seems to me to be justified. The price of petrol is higher in Assam than in Calcutta or elsewhere. This remarkable example of capitalist economy was in evidence in Burma also. Burmese or Assamese petrol is cheaper in London than in the country which produces it, where the oil is pumped and refined.

And so good-bye to the valley of the Brahmaputra, and across the forests and over the hills to Silchar and Sylhet in the Surma Valley.\*

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\* Written on December 9, 1937.

## IN THE SURMA VALLEY

### IN THE SURMA VALLEY

By JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

As I journeyed from one valley to another, the railway crept along (for it went very slowly) between thick forests on either side; almost impenetrable, so they seemed. They came right up to the railway line, leaving only a narrow passage grudgingly for us to pass through. Their million eyes seemed to look down with disdain on this human effort, and were full of the hostility of the forest against Man, who had dared so much against it, and cleared it to enlarge his domain. Their thousand mouths were agape with the desire to swallow him and his works.

Call of the jungle and the mountain has always been strong within me, a dweller of cities and of plains though I am, and I gazed at these forests and jungles, fascinated, and wondered what myriad forms of life and what tragedy they hid in their darknesses. Bountiful nature, or nature red in tooth and claw—was it much worse in these forest recesses than in the cities and the dwelling-places of men and women? A wild animal kills for food to *satisfy* his hunger. He does not kill for sport or for the pleasure of killing. The fierce fights of the jungle are individual fights, not the mass murder that man calls war; there is no wholesale destruction by bomb and poison gas. The comparison seemed to be all in favour of the forest and the wild animals.

So I thought as I watched the passing jungles. Gatherings of people at small stations, and many tribal folk with gracious gifts of fruit and flowers and cloth, woven by themselves, and fresh milk came to welcome me. Bright-eyed Naga children gave me garlands to wear. Some of these tribal people pressed some money

on me also, copper and nickel coins, for Congress work, they said. And I felt shamed and humbled before their clear gaze, full of faith and affection. What of the cities with their selfishness and intrigues and money-grabbing?

And so to our destination and big-crowds and rousing welcomes and Bande Mataram shouted vigorously to the skies. A motor journey through the villages with crowds and welcome everywhere, and on to Silchar. The audience at the meeting there seemed to be bigger than what I had been told the population of the city was. Probably many people came from the villages.

For three days I rushed about the Valley, chiefly in the Sylhet district. As in the Assam Valley, the roads were generally bad and a prodigious number of ferries had to be crossed. But the charm and beauty of the passing scenery held me and made me forget the roads, and the warmth of the welcome from all manner of people sent a glow to my heart.

Sylhet was definitely Bengal. The language proclaimed it, so also the zamindari tenants who came and of whom a large number were Muslims. And yet it had much in common with the Valley of the Brahmaputra; tea gardens with their unhappy and helpless-looking labourers, Excluded Areas with tribal people. It was Bengal, but it seemed to possess a definite individuality of its own, hard to define, but something that was in the air.

I was gratified by the enthusiasm for the Congress which the masses showed, an enthusiasm shared by the Muslims as well as the Hindus, and even by the tribal people. Obviously good work had been done there in the past and the harvest was promising. It was pleasing also to find earnest workers in all parts of the district. Sylhet has a good number of them and the human material they deal with is also good. Much, therefore, can be expected of Sylhet. Unfortunately some local disputes have marred the good work, but these cannot be allowed to continue. The cause is greater than the individual, and

the worker who does not realize this has failed to learn the first lesson of a Congressman. But I have confidence in Sylhet, in its people, and in its Congress workers, earnest and keen as they are and with a record of sacrifice for the cause behind them. And so, as I was leaving Sylhet and was asked for a message, I said, "Go ahead, Sylhet!"

In the Bhanubil area of Sylhet I came across a large number of Manipuris. Hundreds of charkhas, with Manipuri women and girls plying the wheel, sat there in ordered array to welcome me, and their menfolk and charming children stood by. I was surprised and pleased to see these Manipuris and delighted to learn of the brave part they had taken in the Civil Disobedience movement. They had also had an economic no-tax movement of their own some years ago, when an attempt was made to enhance their rents.

Here were entirely new people, new to me and so different from all others I had seen in India. How little we know of our own country and her children! Their features were Mongoloid, they resembled somewhat the Burmese. Indeed the resemblances to the Burmese were many, and included the dress of their womenfolk. They were extraordinarily neat and clean-looking, and the young girls, with the laughter lurking in their eyes, had quite a smart modern look. The children were charming, with their hair over their foreheads cut short and arranged neatly in front. These fascinating people were peasant folk with little or no education, good spinners and weavers, taking pride in themselves. They were all Vaishnavas by religion, but even here some Burmese customs had crept in and, as I was told, their marriages could be dissolved.

In the hills between the two valleys there lies the State of Manipur, which is the centre of these people, and from there this Bhanubil branch had migrated some generations back. When did the original stock come

from Burma or elsewhere, I wondered. They were called backward, I suppose, and yet with education and opportunity what could not be done with this attractive and intelligent-looking people?

In Sylhet I came across many Muslim fishermen, who complained to me that they were treated as social outcasts and as a kind of depressed class by their own co-religionists.

In Sylhet also many Nagas from the surrounding hills came to visit me with greetings and gifts. And from them and others I heard a story which India ought to know and to cherish. It was the story of a young woman of their tribe belonging to the Koboi clan in the Naga Hills. She was of the priestly class and she had the unique opportunity among her people to receive some education in a mission school, where she reached the ninth or tenth class. Guidallo was her name and she was about nineteen six years ago when civil disobedience blazed over the length and breadth of India. News of Gandhi and the Congress reached her in her hill abode and found an echo in her heart. She dreamed of freedom for her people and an ending of the galling restrictions they suffered from, and she raised the banner of independence and called her people to rally round it. Perhaps she thought, rather prematurely, that the British Empire was fading out. But that Empire still functioned effectively and aggressively and it took vengeance on her and her people. Many villages were burnt and destroyed and this heroic girl was captured and sentenced to transportation for life. And now she lies in some prison in Assam, wasting her bright young womanhood in dark cells and solitude. Six years she has been there. What torment and suppression of spirit they have brought to her, who in the pride of her youth dared to challenge an Empire! She can roam no more in the hill country through the forest glades, or sing in the fresh crisp air of the mountains. This wild young thing sits cabined in darkness, with a few yards, may be, of space in the day-

time, eating her fiery heart in desolation and confinement. And India does not even know of this brave child of her hills, with the free spirit of the mountains in her. But her own people remember their Rani Guidallo\* and think of her with love and pride. And a day will come when India also will remember her and cherish her, and bring her out of her prison cell.

But our so called Provincial Autonomy will not help in bringing about this release. More is needed. For the Excluded Areas are outside the ken of our Provincial ministries, and strange to say, they are even more cut off from us now than they were before the advent of "Provincial Autonomy". Even questions about Guidallo were not allowed to be put in the Assam Assembly. So we progress to Swaraj through the Government of India Act, 1935.

Darkness had set in and my tour was approaching its appointed end. We reached Habiganj late in the evening, and after the meeting there hurried on to Shastaganj to catch our train. The crescent moon hung over the horizon, with its silvery brightness gone and looking gloomy and yellow. I thought of the past twelve days with all their quick movement and crowds and enthusiasm, and it all seemed like a dream that was over. And I thought of Guidallo, the Rani, sitting in her prison cell. What thoughts were hers, what regrets, what dreams?

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\*Rani Guidallo, the Naga heroine was released from jail in 1949 after imprisonment for 18 years. She is now in her village home in Naga Hills.

## A LESS PLEASANT ERRAND

By JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

I am going to speak to you to-night about Assam, where recently a great earthquake brought death and disaster to many and, to some extent, changed even the outward features of the land. I have visited this border province of ours on several occasions in the past when I was more care-free and had some leisure to float about on the broad bosom of that noble river, the Brahmaputra. Again I went there, summoned by the earthquake, on a less pleasant errand.

Look at the map of India. You will find Assam on the north-eastern corner, bordering Tibet and China and Burma and Pakistan. Thus from the international point of view, this province of ours has a very special significance. In the old days also it was a frontier province, but the north-east frontier was not considered particularly important and all our attention was concentrated on the north-western frontier.

Now changing conditions have made this north-east corner vital to us in many respects, and I have no doubt that this importance will grow. From being a neglected outpost of an empire, it has become the meeting place of many nations and it might become, in the future, a high-road between some of those countries and ours.

Within the borders of Assam and adjoining it are large tribal tracts where many tribes, in various stages of development, have lived for ages past. Do not imagine that all these tribes are backward. Some of them are certainly backward in many ways, but others have developed their own peculiar institutions, often of a democratic nature, and are, in some ways, fairly advanced. All of them are very attractive, and so I have found them.

Ever since I first visited Assam, many years ago, I have been attracted by the beautiful valley of the Brahmaputra and the mountains and forests that lie beyond. The people there have their own distinctive features. They are simple, unsophisticated and likable. There is a very unusual combination of semi-tropical scenery and snow-capped mountains. The Brahmaputra, after a long journey through Tibet, rushes down through mighty gorges into the Assam Valley, where it becomes a placid river, sometimes spreading out almost like the sea.

Perhaps many of you think of Assam in connection with tea. These tea gardens, well-tended and attractive-looking, cover a large part of Assam. Apart from this, the chief cultivation is paddy—orange trees and pine-apples and bamboos and palms and the beautiful and graceful areca trees, from which our Supari comes, abound in the province.

In this peaceful province, rather slow-moving, came the sudden shock of the earthquake. It was the evening of August 15, when all over India some kind of celebrations had been organized for Independence Day. Soon after half past seven, the earth trembled and shook, and heaved up or subsided, and houses tumbled down, and great landslides occurred in the hills. Frightened people rushed about in the dark, not knowing what the fate of their neighbours might be.

It took some time for people to get information of what had happened, because telegraph and telephone wires broke and the other normal means of communication were disrupted. Slowly news trickled through, and we realized the extent of the disaster. Or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that we do not yet realize the full extent of what has happened because several parts were completely cut off and it has not yet been possible to reach them.

It is said that the epicentre of the earthquake was somewhere in Tibet, near a place called Reema, some

miles from the Assam frontier. We know nothing of what has happened in Tibet or in the mountainous regions of the border.

As a result of the landslides, rivers were blocked up for a while and, when they broke through, they came down with a rush and a roar, a high wall of water sweeping down and flooding large areas and washing away villages and fields and gardens. These rivers had changed their colour and carried some sulphurous and other material which spread a horrible smell for some distance around them. The fish in them died. The remains of villages, animals, including cattle and elephants, and large quantities of timber floated down these raging waters.

Paddy fields were destroyed, stocks of grains were washed away, and some tea gardens also suffered great damage.

It is difficult to estimate the damage that has been done. The loss of human life was not so great as it might have been in a more populous area. Probably not more than a thousand people have perished. Most of these died by being crushed by the landslides or swept away by the rivers in sudden flood.

Some may have died, or may be dying now, for lack of food. There are large areas still, more especially in the North Lakhimpur district, east of the river Subansiri, which are very difficult of access and are waterlogged. Even when one crosses this angry river Subansiri, and that is a difficult task, one has to face a combination of flood and forest, and internal movement is not easy. There are numbers of people marooned in different parts of this area in North Lakhimpur.

Beyond this area there are the hills which are even more inaccessible and about which we have practically no information yet. There is no doubt, however, that the tribal people who live there have suffered and are suffering greatly.

The damage to public buildings and public works has been very heavy. National highways have been torn and twisted and have sometimes a strange vertical appearance. Bridges have been washed away or broken, railway lines have snapped or are twisted. Some of these roads and tracks will have to be re-aligned completely for long distances.

When the earthquake came, three parties consisting of the Assam Rifles and some of our Army men were on their way to our frontier outposts. One such party, comprising 25 men of the Assam Rifles and 60 porters, was suddenly buried in the heavy landslides. They managed to escape through rolling down the rocks, except for four porters who lost their lives. But they lost everything they had,—food, clothing, utensils, arms and ammunition, wireless set etc. They were marooned for a number of days without food. Ultimately a rescue party reached them.

The second and third party also had strange and exciting experiences and had to be rescued right on the borders of Tibet. Some of them, in fact, could not come back at all, because the bridge over the river had been washed away and the only way for them was into Tibet.

In the same way some Tibetans were cut off and marooned on the Indian side of the border and could not go back.

These are the difficulties which we have had to face. The Government of India naturally wanted to give the utmost help. The Air Force sent a number of Dakotas for dropping food in those areas which were cut off.

Every day our aircrafts fly, often through bad weather, taking rice and other foodstuffs and drop them for these starving people. We have now sent some smaller planes also for reconnaissance work as well as to land some of our officers in these marooned areas, if that is possible.

In addition to our own aircraft, two small planes belonging to the tea companies have also done excellent work in carrying and dropping food in these areas.

Then, there is our Army which is rapidly trying to build up new roads and bridges and give such other help as it can. It is now organizing small parties of stout-hearted men and strong swimmers who will brave the raging torrents and enter that difficult region which has been cut off from us since the earthquake. Our railway-men and engineers are working hard to get the railway to function again. The restoration of communications is of the first importance.

Meanwhile, the Brahmaputra, spreading as far as eye can reach, flows along in an angry mood. It has changed its course at places and, at Dibrugarh, is cutting away into parts of the inhabited city. Some buildings and roads have already been smashed and consumed by its swirling waters. Our engineers are hard at work to stop this continuous erosion. Not much more can be done at present. Later, more permanent methods will have to be employed.

Volunteer relief societies, local as well as from outside, are doing good work. I should specially like to mention the fine work being done by the staff and students of the Medical College at Dibrugarh. Here is a chance for every able-bodied man and woman in Assam to help in relief and reconstruction.

And so, while I know that Assam badly needs every kind of help from other parts of India, I call upon the people to rely upon themselves and to help each other and their province at this time of crisis.

I have told you briefly of conditions in Assam now. How can we help, as help we must, to the utmost of our capacity? It will do no good for large numbers of people to rush to Assam, for they will only become a burden there. Selected persons with special knowledge or capacity might be able to help.

We can all help by subscribing generously to the Governor's Relief Fund. That is the least we can do. I shall gladly accept and forward any subscriptions that are sent to me.

We can all help also by strictly conserving the nation's food supply and preventing all waste or misuse. Every State Government must enforce its procurement schemes, so that all available food can be utilised to the best advantage, not only in Assam but in other areas of scarcity. Even in Assam, while there is scarcity and famine and starvation in some areas, most of which are cut off from us for the present, other procurement schemes must function there immediately, as elsewhere.

Those who desire to profit by this emergency and hoard foodgrains or try to sell them at high prices in the blackmarket must be considered enemies of society and should be dealt with as such. There can be no greater crime than for a person to make profit at the cost of death to his fellowmen.

There has been, often enough, a certain timidity in this matter, and the law with its interminable delays and complications frightens people, but the law is good enough and is meant to prevent evil and help in good deeds. It is men of strength that we need to enforce the law without fear or favour.

Disaster has descended upon parts of our country, Assam has suffered great floods and great loss. The only way to meet this is with a stern determination not to allow either Nature's vagaries or mens' follies to come in the way of the work we have to do.

On such occasions one inevitably thinks of the precarious hold that life has. A slight tremor of the earth's surface, a faint ripple, cause mountains to tumble, rivers to change their courses, and houses to collapse and men to die.

Whether it is long or short, life has the same inevitable end, but while it lasts, we can make it worthwhile or futile, noble or petty and mean.

It is not by submission to evil, or by surrender even to nature's challenge, or by a mere passive looking on at what happens or by empty prayer that men achieve. The challenge has come to us in many ways in this country. It is up to us to answer that challenge in every department of life and public affairs with faith and confidence in ourselves and in our courage. Jai Hind.\*

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\*A broadcast talk by Sri Nehru from All India Radio on September 9, 1950, on his return to New Delhi after his tour in Assam in connection with the Assam Earthquake.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DR. SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

[Dr. Radhakrishnan is one of the outstanding figures in India, and his vast erudition has made him known throughout the world. He is regarded as the ablest interpreter of India's thought and culture to outside world.

It was not until India had become free that Dr. Radhakrishnan joined, or rather had been dragged to, politics. Not few were surprised when he accepted the office of an ambassador, leaving the University lecture-halls to which he had been so closely wedded for years. He is now the Vice-President of the Indian Republic,—an office created under the new Constitution of India,—and is the presiding officer of the Rajya Sabha (the Council of States) of the Indian Parliament.

Dr. Radhakrishnan has so far visited Assam on two occasions. First he came here as the Chairman of the University Education Commission in 1950. This was followed by another visit when this distinguished personality came to deliver his address to the first Convocation of the Gauhati University.]

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## GREATNESS OF A UNIVERSITY

by DR. SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

I am happy to be here this morning and participate in your first Convocation. Those who are taking Degrees to-day, especially those who have won University distinctions have my very best wishes for their future.

As the first graduates of the University, it is your proud privilege to establish high traditions of integrity and selfless service to humanity. The greatness of a University depends on the way in which its members bear themselves in times of stress and strain.

Your province has suffered from unkind nature in recent months. It occupies a strategical position in India and so the people of Assam have special responsibilities. In facing them it is essential that we do not succumb to despair. We must be able to face however unpleasant they may be and not fear to express truth however unwelcome it may be.

We achieved political independence in August, 1947, but it is not real freedom, though an essential step towards it. A feeling of joy, an exhilaration of spirit, an outburst of creative energies generally characterize a time of awakening. They marked the triumph of the French Revolution, the Russian and, in our own day, the Chinese Revolution. These Revolutions brought new hope to their countries which were, for centuries, exploited and misgoverned. In our country too, the reawakening has come. We are struggling to be free from the shackles forged by our own past, or, imposed from outside. We hear from every side the sound of the breaking of chains, but freedom of movement has not yet

been attained. We do not seem to feel the flow, the buoyancy of renewed life, the sense of release from apathy and stupor, groping and confusion. We happen to live in a state of social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual insecurity. Either we summon up courage to face extinction and bring about radical changes in our social and economic order or violent revolutions are not inevitable. They are not a part of historic destiny. They are the outcome of neglected responsibilities. The present state of our country and the world is a challenge to, and reminder of, our unfulfilled duties.

My special interest all these years has been study of philosophy, a subject which is perhaps the most many-sided and the most inspiring. It exhorts us to care for the things of the mind above all material possessions. It demands from us full, free and fearless inquiry, truthful investigation in all branches of learning. Philosophical learning is not purely intellectual but one in which intellect is touched with emotion. Philosophy is love of wisdom, and love indicates an emotional glow. So far as Indian philosophy is concerned it has never been a static deposit. It has always been a dynamic flow. The symbol of the *Dharmachakra* which we have put into our National Flag indicates this perpetual movement. We are now at the beginning of a new epoch and can look forward with interest to a new departure which in the case of a civilization as old as ours may be a new revival. It is a reinterpretation of the implications of the text *that art thou*. The unit of value is the human individual even the most obscure, the least able to speak for himself. The value of the social order is in proportion to the opportunities it gives every individual to grow into a healthy, balanced, responsible citizen of his country.

Democracy is based on the conviction of the supreme value of the individual, his pre-eminence over race, class, state, nation, economic power, religious persuasion. If we make man subject to and enslaved by these objects, our democracy is only a political pose and not a

genuine concern. If our Government act as powerful agents of disorder and oppression, they will be faced with the imminent possibility of total functional failure, and therefore, violent overthrow. The implacable struggle against oppression is the meaning of history. Every revolution has been a battle for the freedom and dignity of man.

The problems that face us to-day are the management of ourselves and the management of society. The two are inter-dependent and equally important. Society has no right to efface the individual for its own satisfaction or development any more than the individual has the right to disregard, for the sake of his own satisfaction or development, the interests of his fellow beings.

We indulge in a violent misuse of terms when we look upon the human individual as a fragment of matter and at the same time a creator of something new. It is unfortunate that reactionary religion has been mixed up with placid retrograde social life, and that progressive reactive movements have often been bound up with the denial of spirit which is the very source of all creative activity and endeavour. If man is only the product of his natural and social environment, if he is entirely moulded by society and owes everything to it, if there is no element in him superior to nature and society, how can we control natural and social forces and create something entirely new? If we are to affirm the creative role of man in the world, we must save him from the dehumanization which is taking place, and check the substitution of the mass man for the genuine person which is often the result of the technical manipulation of human life in completely planned society. Man is in a very sad state. He is inwardly torn to pieces and is thus an easy prey to mass suggestion. Man must rise above matter instead of being enslaved by it. The advent of a new man, an authentic person, a spiritual revolutionary, who will light up the future is our need.

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

We cannot create a decent human society with poor human material even as we cannot build a good house with bad stone and rotten timber. There are quick remedies suggested for changing the social order but what prevents the change is the human factor. We must train leaders with moral sense, a social purpose and responsibility for the future of our country and the world. A new structure requires a new spirit. From our own living depths we must effect a social reorganization and not oppose it under the pretence of preserving old forms of society which are unjust.

On the social side, the two outstanding features of our age are social revolution and growing world unity. We have to contribute to both these trends of social development. We must not be afraid of the social movements that are taking place in the world but inspire them with our faith in the human spirit and attempt to free them from the virus of hatred which tends to creep into it.

Political independence has given to our struggle a new direction. We have to feed our people, clothe them and help them to lead the good life. We must confess to a sense of guilt before the large scale human suffering inflicted by poverty. It is no more a question of charity but of justice. Either we face the problems of poverty and disease, hunger and ignorance courageously or we will bring the country to chaos.

We must put aside our prosperity for self-delusion, reorganize our agriculture and make it co-operative, carry out speedily our multipurpose schemes. If we delay radical reforms in industry and property rights, many of our people, out of a sense of frustration, will be led to believe that Communism alone holds the key to progress. Those who warn us against radical changes are afraid of losing their comfortable lives, their powers and privileges to which they are accustomed and which they regard as their rights. Those who do hard work, day in and day out, without which community life would come to a

standstill, do not threaten us with the dire evils which are proclaimed by the privileged. We cannot struggle against the future in the name of a past that is already disintegrating. It is a barren form of conflict which bases itself on ideas that are outmoded.

Our leaders should work for achieving a classless co-operative, cohesive society based on democratic principles. Social order is something evolved from within, not something imposed from without. It is an internal stability, a vital harmony and not something held together by force. Only by working for a social democracy can we make out that the achievements of democracy are better than the promises of dictatorship. The world is heading for socialism in one form or another. We can build a new social order without any weakening of the spiritual forces.

We hope that the social revolution necessary will be carried out in a peaceful way, but much will depend on the degree of resistance put up by forces which up till now have predominated and the courage and strength of our leaders.

Universities can help us to create new men for the new world. Extreme specialization is a grave danger. We must train not only specialists in different fields but men with a human outlook, a social sense. Hitler succeeded in Germany because educated people there were specialists in narrow fields of study and were neglectful of human and social problems. If our people are to fill positions of responsibility, they must be trained in literature, philosophy and history.

The University should be the inspiring home of all the science as well as preparation ground for civic life. Its departments should be not only co-existent but co-operative.

If a University is to flourish and thrive it is only by the force of living example which must fire the students with the noble ambition of exulting the learn-

ing of the learned and following the footsteps of the explorers of new fields of research. The greatest educative force is the force of personality, the power of sympathy, the sway of the living world, the contagion of personal example.

In our report on University Education, we laid great stress on the need to raise the rewards and dignities of the teachers if we are to divert the talent which now finds its way into more profitable professions into the service of the Universities. I still hope that the Governments, Central and Provincial, will look into this important recommendation.

I am happy to note that in this University, under the guidance of a scholar Vice-Chancellor, the right outlook is being maintained. Civilized values lend dignity and purpose to life.

The international situation again calls for tolerance and understanding. The second World War was over five years ago, but we have no signs of peace. The Allies of the last war are getting ready to attack one another. Bruised humanity is again threatened with deadly weapons which may kill it at any moment. Hatred and fear are torturing our sick society.

In spite of short distances and rapidity of transport we look at each other in a deforming light according to the ideological propaganda which has been impressed on different peoples. Warring creeds are monopolizing men's minds. It is one of the ironies of history that while we plead for tolerance, for the practice of the precept of Jesus to love one another we are unable to differ without hating. Diversity instead of being a source of richness has become one of discord. Unity is regarded as the opposite of diversity when, in fact, there is no real antinomy between them. Nothing is further removed from truth than the lofty self-sufficiency of those who claim to walk in the truth and complain that others are sunk in darkness. Sometimes, those

who groan in darkness are perhaps better than those who believe themselves to be torch-bearers. The conflict of opposing groups cannot be overcome by external political methods. The awakening of the moral sense, of mutual understanding is our need. True democracy demands a catholicity of mind which does not ask for special prerogatives for one's own theories, political, economic or religious but aims at understanding their distinctive role, their strength as well as their weakness.

Democracy is at the opposite extreme to the attitude which impels us to impose our doctrines on others. Instead of hurling anathemas on our enemies we should try to understand and regenerate system which are opposed to ours. We must develop the will to work together, the will to make concessions where necessary. To despair of peaceful settlements, to threaten a war by mutual recrimination and increase of armaments is a crime. We do not wish the human race to be exterminated by atom bombs.

The aim of the leading nations of the world should be not to dominate but to serve, to preserve among men confidence in goodwill, in the spirit of co-operation, in justice, in goodness in compassion for the weak and the outcast, in human dignity and power of truth.

I do not apprehend the imminence of another war. I cannot conceive the possibility of anything so suicidal or so unnecessary. But we must look at the outstanding issues in an objective spirit, taking the interests not of this or that nation but of humanity as a whole. We must ask, not who is right but what is right. This approach is not possible so long as we are overcome by force. Fear is not a wise counsellor. Victory over fear is the principal duty of man. We cannot remain happy in a world stricken with fear.

We are beginning the second half of this century with mounting tension between two hostile groups. A

process of auto-intoxication is building up two groups each with its bonds of fellowship and community of interests. It is essential that ideas must cross and recross without being held up at the ideological frontiers. Loyalty to a group of powers which is not world wide will retard the advance to world unity. So long as we do not develop loyalty to the world-community our scientific progress and ethical idealism will be disgraced by their cruel applications. Our heroism and endurance will be used to produce crippled children, displaced persons, distressed areas, concentration camp. Group loyalties in an aeroplane age are a treachery of the spirit. To be insular in this age, to be overconfident that we have nothing to learn from others are crimes which history will not forgive. We need a process of re-education which makes us aware of our membership in a world community even as our present education helps us to understand the needs of our nation or the claims of our ideology. We must give our attention to the things which have been achieved by the different nations of the world. Such as understanding of the contributions of different peoples to human civilization will stress the sense of human fellowship.

The United Nations Organization must be taken more seriously and be made more representative of the peoples of the world than it is at present. The long suffering Chinese people who have been maltreated and misgoverned for centuries have elected to be under a regime which gives them hope for the future and they are not represented in the U.N. The United Nations must be in a position to reassure the countries of the world, especially those in Asia and Africa of freedom and security. Humanity cannot endure half-starving, half-prosperous, half-free, half-slave.

We stand on the threshold of a new day. Events of surpassing importance are happening around us. Never before have we been confronted by such challenging tasks and opportunities. Where can we find those

men and women who will lead our people to great heights of vision and achievement. We have unlimited resource in our youth. The problems facing us may seem formidable but it is not necessary in order to undertake.

It is my hope and prayer that the Gauhati University may prosper in years to come, grow in usefulness and produce in increasing numbers of men and women endowed with drive, determination, discipline and, above all, the spirit of democracy to serve the cause of this country and the world.\*

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\* Speech delivered at the first Convocation of the  
Gauhati University, 1951.

## GREATER FUTURE FOR ASSAM

by DR. SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

We are extremely grateful to the students of the Cotton College and the public of Gauhati for your generous words of welcome. We are very happy to be here and see also the new University rise from its very beginning. One thing that struck us most was the beautiful natural scenery of the city. When I was having tea this afternoon at the back of the Circuit House I was reminded of the American University of Beirut, and one of my colleagues remarked that if you build a university on the banks of the Brahmaputra you will have a university on one of the finest sites in the whole world. Therefore, Nature has been lavish in her gifts to you and it remains to see what you will do with this natural resources which are so plentiful at your disposal.

You have started well; you have started a university. You do not want to be attached any more to the University of Calcutta. You wanted to grow in your own natural surroundings, develop in response to your local needs and build a university of which your province could well be proud of. I may assure you that we the members of the Commission would very gladly see every kind of step taken by you to advance from strength to greater strength. I should like to tell you, on behalf of the Commission, that it would be our endeavour within the functions allowed to us to assist the growth of this University.

You have spoken of your present needs and step-motherly treatment which the Central Government is giving you. We are not politicians in the sense of the

term. We have nothing to do with the administration of the Central Government or how that Government should help you best. But I want to say one thing that the Central Government or the Provincial Government will both be judged by their accomplishments and their achievements. How you can improve and make the country self-sufficient so far as foodgrains are concerned? It means agriculture, it means scientific agriculture, developing properly trained men who will be able to utilize the resources to the best advantage. It again means development of universities of the first quality where people will be trained who will be able to convert natural resources into human utility. However much people may say it is universities that can produce better scientifically trained men, better doctors, to help primary education, sanitation and health or grow more food campaign. All these things can get inspiration from the type of men who can send power and strength into the community itself. Our people are today in positions of power and responsibility. One thing which they have to see in all their dealings is the spirit of selflessness and sacrifice which enabled us to obtain political freedom. We repeat the name of Gandhiji. We talk about ancient traditions, but if there is one quality that has come down to us from those ancient times till today it is this: great constructionism. Construction is possible only through a spirit of sacrifice. We are the great people of this country,—not the monarchs, not the industrialists, not the military geniuses but they are the people who by their lives of austerity and renunciation help build up their country. Good people built this country through their spirit of renunciation. If you are a good man, your quality is one of discipline and sacrifice. Capitalists, labourers and Ministers at the Centre and in the Province will all have to show a spirit of sacrifice and complete dedication to the service of our country. If we fail in this great hour of our history we will fail because our men are not great

enough, are not able to produce that spirit of sacrifice either among themselves or among the public whom they inform and inspire. We built it up under the advice of Gandhiji and his able leadership. He was an embodiment of the spirit of true sacrifice and complete dedication in the interest of the common man.

During the days of subjection we used to take a pledge on January 26 declaring the cultural, political, economic and spiritual harm done to us by the foreign rule. Now there is no more scapegoat for throwing our blame on. We will be judged by the measure by which we liberate ourselves culturally, economically and spiritually. The political liberation is over but the three other liberations are yet to be achieved, and if we wish to be judged as a generous government, a progressive government, one question which we would ask them is: how far have they assisted in developing the country economically, culturally, socially and spiritually?

One of your addresses referred to the great ancestry of this part of the country. Pragjyotishapura, Kamrupa, Sankar Dev and all great names you mentioned which made Assam great in the history of our land. But it is no use always repeating the glories of the past.

You have a verse in the *Mahabharata* where Draupadi says: "I was born in a noble family under divine auspices but how that all matter when I am dragged by my hair to dust?"

So also, so long as you are economically backward, you are culturally inefficient and spiritually it is not a life that you are leading, it is bare existence. Now that you have political freedom in your hand, it is your duty to build up an India which is great in every sense of the term and not merely an India which is politically liberated.

Yours is a country which is said to be mainly agricultural where nearly eight percent of the people are engaged in agriculture. You are importing food-

grains to the extent of 130 crores of rupees and it is a matter of shame. It is so in a country like ours where most of the people are engaged in agriculture. What is the way by which you can remedy the present position?

If our people regard themselves as inheritors of the great past or as real, sincere followers of Mahatma Gandhi one test is: are we setting aside our petty narrow self-interest and are we devoting ourselves to build up a great country? That is one test which each one of us will have to put himself when one is taking up the service of the land. We must not be led by a false sense of security; now that we have won political freedom we must not become self-righteous. This attitude will bring about degradation of life. It is essential for us to believe that we have achieved only the first step, and have made a small beginning. The great construction is yet to come and if India is to prosper and India is to help herself and through her to help the world, she must, first of all, built up a perfect regime.

Assam has done brilliantly and splendidly but I want to see what Assam is going to do now,—now that you have a government of your own trusted leaders, leaders who have confidence of the public and who are interested in promoting the interest of the common man. When you have these opportunities how best you are able to sink your differences and co-operate with your leaders and build up a great country? That is the true test.

The National Flag is the symbol of renunciation, true selflessness and complete detachment. If you want to be loyal to that Flag you must develop and cultivate that spirit of utter renunciation and of utter self-control. But mere renunciation is not enough. Renunciation is not an end in itself. It is for building up a great paradise on earth and to lead you through suffering, through spiritual methods, to creative life. The end is creative life and the means to it is the spirit which is represented by suffering.

The Flag also represents to you through the *Chakra* that the world is a perpetual movement. *Chakra* indicates to you that there is nothing stagnant in the world. It is moving forward from one step to another. Adopt changes as they are needed. Do not go about digging yourself in and saying we have great past and we can rest on it. There is no such thing as great past. It does not lead you to a great future and the *Chakra* symbolized on that Flag is the symbol of the perpetual movement in which we are all implicated. Movement is life; stagnation is death. If you become immobile you have already become dead. If you are alive, you must go on steadily onward and onward. But with that kind of white background whatever movement you adopt, do not forget the eternal value. It is the symbol for which your Flag stands. Believe, therefore, in the ultimacy of spiritual value; believe in the perpetual movement of this process; believe also that through renunciation and suffering alone you can build up creative life and the need of our existence here is to build up this kind of life. If you have to put up the Flag, know the full implications and act in accordance with the spirit and I have no doubt Assam will have a much greater future than the past which she has ever had.\*

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## CHAPTER IX

## CHAKRAVARTI RAJAGOPALACHARI

[Sri Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, commonly referred to as "C. R." and affectionately called Rajaji, visited Assam, for the first time, in 1922. He came in connection with the non-co-operation movement inquiry. He was a member of the inquiry committee. Since the committee toured Assam fairly extensively, Rajaji got an opportunity to come in contact with villagers. His second visit was in 1926 when he attended the Gauhati session of the Congress at Pandu.

Rajaji's third visit was of more than usual interest. He came in 1949 as the first and the last Governor-General of India under a changed atmosphere, for the country had then become free. The visit greatly enthused the people. Its particular significance was the fact that, on November 26, 1949 when Rajaji arrived in Assam, the Constituent Assembly, at New Delhi, adopted the new Constitution of India under which India was to be proclaimed a Republic exactly two months later, i.e. on January 26, 1950. This significance did not escape Rajaji's attention. In fact, the "authoritative interpreter", as Rajaji was regarded by Mahatma Gandhi, felt that his two visits to Assam in 1922 and 1949 had established a happy link between Assam of 1922 and Assam that emerged in 1949. That was perhaps why at a mammoth public meeting at Gauhati which he addressed on November 26, 1949 Rajaji himself said, amidst cheers, "It was long ago that I was in Assam. It was then the beginning of non-cooperation, and it is not a mere coincidence that I am here again today (November 26, 1949) when non-cooperation has blossomed into a free Constitution of India."]

\* A speech delivered at a public meeting at Gauhati in 1950.

## FROM THE BRAHMAPUTRA

By CHAKRAVARTY RAJAGOPALACHARI

I am writing from my cabin in the steam-boat as it throbs in its course up the great and beautiful Brahmaputra to Tezpur in Assam. The Civil Disobedience Inquiry Committee has almost finished its long tour. At its sitting in Gauhati in Mr. Phookun's (Tarun Ram Phookun) house, we had the privilege to meet and hear the views of some of the bravest and truest of Gandhiji's soldiers, young men holding high the torch of faith amidst the cruelty and devastation of illegality and unrestrained repression, strong and cheerful, in spite of darkness and depression all around. If India had such youths, courage and faith serving the cause in all her provinces, there would be no need to doubt the early attainment of our goal.

In the province of Assam, as in Utkal, politics practically began with non-cooperation. The workers are all young men fired with religious fervour and pledged to Mahatmaji's political faith. They know no distinction between politics and religion or between creed and policy. Repression has failed to depress them. Eagerly they welcomed Panditji (Madan Mohan Malaviya) and the other Congress leaders, thirsting to have a deep draught of fresh and invigorating faith.

We arrived by boat, at beautiful Gauhati and were taken to Mr. Phookun's house, the place hallowed by Mahatmaji's stay last year with brave Mohammed Ali. Mr. Phookun was not there for he had gone back to prison after his parole was over. His sister and Mrs. Phookun and other ladies of the family welcomed us with the *uludhwani* according to time-honoured custom and little girls sang a national song as we came up. We sat

facing old Brahmaputra and heard, among other things, the tale of "law" in one of the districts of Assam, to serve as an abject lesson to protect citizens.

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How I wish it were possible that some of my dear sisters of Tamil land could go to Assam and see the simple and diligent daughters of that beautiful country at their family looms.

The time that highborn ladies spend in laboriously picking and choosing from the silks exhibited in the bazar, their sisters in Assam spend in plying the shuttle and making garments for themselves and their children. The silks that the high caste ladies of South India buy are the ruin of their families. Little do they realize that while they are thinking what pattern or which colour they should select, their husbands are thinking how to meet the bill and what hardship life is. God made woman to console men and beautify his life, not to make it miserable. Yet in ninety-nine out of hundred high caste families in South India, the purpose of woman's association with man is lost by the ignorant love for costly silks and precious stones.\*

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\* From *Young India*, 1922.

## CHAPTER X

### JAIRAMDAS DOULATRAM

[Sri Jairamdas Doulatram is a veteran among Congressmen whose contribution to India's struggle for freedom is acknowledged as plentiful. Notwithstanding his active participation in all phases of the Congress movement, Sri Jairamdas Doulatram's principal interest from 1919-1930 had been in journalism; and, as a journalist, associated with a number of leading newspapers of the country, he has endeavoured to study public affairs objectively. Having been in Assam since May, 1950 when he was appointed Governor of the State, he has taken an abiding interest in the affairs of Assam, more so because of the peculiar position of the Governor of Assam, in reference to his duties towards the tribals of the State as enshrined in the Constitution. Unlike other State Governors, the Governor of Assam has the statutory obligation to administer, on behalf of the President of India, a fairly large area—an area of vast potential and significance. This area is the North-East Frontier Agency, and is inhabited by over a million of tribal souls. This peculiar position of the Assam Governor obviously enjoins on the incumbent to know and study the problems of Assam with greater avidity and with a large measure of tolerance and friendliness. Sri Jairamdas Doulatram has proved equal to the position.]

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## ASSAM SPEAKS

BY JAIRAMDAS DOULATRAM

Assam speaks through myriad mouths, their varied voices merging in symphony and concord.

Assam speaks through her age-old traditions that take us back to *Pragjyotisha* and her glories dimly glimpsed from the distant past and through the deeds of Mairang Danava, the great Boro King, and of the brave Ghatak, the mighty Narakasur and Bhagadatta, the valorous Ban and the brave warriors who ruled the land thousands of years ago. But the voice of valour was not the only voice of Assam. Assam speaks through the charm of Usha who conquered Aniruddha and the witchery of Chitralekha who rode them both through the air on a magic craft, India's ancient ancestor of the modern plane. Assam speaks through the great Trilochan's spouse, Parvati, of whom Kamakhya is now an abiding monument. She speaks, no less eloquently, through the immortal Jayamati, who braved torture and death for a precious cause, leaving behind an eternal spring of inspiration for our daughters of today. Assam speaks through a crore of human beings, descendants of many an ancient and modern race, sheltered by Mother India's eastern arm, as it stretches into the last of the Himalayas' snow peaks. Where, in days gone by, met the Mongolians and the Aryans, the Kirats and the Ahoms, the Kalitas and the Kochs, and the Mottaks, the Chetias and the Chutias, there, through an orchestra of varied tunes does Assam speak. Assam speaks through her forests which like Nature's green velvet blouse protect half her lovely shape. On her chest of hills rise mighty trees which break our necks as we strain to see their tops. *Simul* and *sal*, *hollock* and *hollong*, *bhelu* and

*roghu, nahor* and *makai*, bamboo and cane,—all these and others richly embroider the blouse with which Nature dressed her on birth. Assam speaks through her million golden paddy fields which stretch on either side of the ancient Lauhitya, like a *muga mekhela* covering her graceful form. Assam speaks through her hundred and twenty one rivers, which bring from the parabola of hills to our north, east and south rich silt-laden rain water to re-invigorate our fields and which pour out the remains into the mighty Brahmaputra, till it reaches its parent home, the Indian Ocean. Through that mighty Brahmaputra which, when the heavens weep, stretches its breast to a breadth of twenty miles to receive the tears where the Dihang, Dibang and Lauhitya meet and, through the world record which Cherrapunji holds as the place of the heaviest rainfall, mounting to the almost unbelievable figure of 600 inches in six months, does Assam speak. Assam speaks with rare elegance and rhythm through her limitless forms of dance and music which vibrate and echo in every hill and valley, unlifing each tribe and community to an ecstacy of emotion, and transfixing the attention of all who come to see Assam in her playful mood. Assam speaks through her *Oja-Pali*, *Durgabari*, *Kamrupi*, *Satriya*, *Bihu*, *Boro*, *Lushai*, *Khasi*, *Pnar*, *Naga*, *Abor*, and other hill peoples' dances, ranging from the gentlest to the most vigorous in movement and action. Assam speaks through her *mridang*, and *khol*, the adopted *tabla* and *dugi*, and through the *dutar*, *violin* and *gitar* of the Khasis and Mizos and through the entrancing *Bor-geet*, *Bon-geet*, *Ankianat* and the hill peoples' melodies inspired by nature's scenic appeal or the fervour of a communal festival. Assam speaks through her many oily throats, ten thousand feet deep, gurgling out liquid fuel which carries man, at a dizzy pace, on land, water and air. Assam speaks in million of homes through the ubiquitous cup of tea, served at breakfast tables all the world over. Assam speaks through the great earthquake of 1950 which shook the

northern mountains to their foundation, pushing lakhs of square miles of hill-sides with crores of trees into neighbouring ravines as if they were little lumps of clay; which left our roads, our rails, our homes, our fields in temporary chaos; which lifted the beds of rivers twenty feet above their old bottoms, and bequeathed a legacy of floods and sand as a challenge to our faith and courage to recreate prosperity. Assam speaks through the roar of Lauhitya's gorge, where tradition makes Parasuram wipe his bloody sword and where the Brahmakund, twisted out of shape by the great earthquake, recovered new form to sustain that ancient tradition. Assam speaks through her damaged Shividol and Rangmahal in broken but brave tones and through the great tanks of Sibsagar, dedicated to the memories of Shiva Singha and Jayamati. Through the ancient monuments at Hajo, Sonitpur, Bhalukpong, Bhishmaknagar, Cheraideo, Dimapur, and through Umananda, Karmanasha, Ashvaklant and the numberless Dolmens of the Khasi and other hills also does Assam, with a hoary yet firm voice, speak. Through the valorous deeds of the great defenders of her freedom, the heroic Lachit who gave us the memorable slogan "My uncle is not above the country", the bold Tirot Singh, whose last defiant challenge "Better the death of a free commoner than the life of a slave king" ever stirs us to sacrifice and resistance, and the spirited Piali Phukan and Maniram Dewan who rose against foreign rule, does Assam speak. Assam speaks through her ever-free womanhood, whether of the plains or of the hills, through the gaily dressed, smiling, hardy girls of the hills, and the gentle, pure-hearted, public-spirited women of the plains who "weave lovely poems on their looms". Through the wisdom of *Dakar Vachan*, the poetry of the *Ramayana* of Madhava Kandali and the simple direct diction of the *Buranjis* of the Ahoms, and many other literary works of the mid-ages and recent times, does Assam speak.

Assam speaks in a voice of unusual richness through the deeds and writings of the great Sri Sankardev, who revolutionized the religious and social life of the entire Brahmaputra valley; who scintillated with brilliance while yet in his teens, and kept his grandeur of thought and action at a high level throughout his life's great span of 120 years; who started a chain of the famous *Satras* of Assam through which the religion of devotion was propagated by the powerful media of *natya*, *nritya* and *geet*, dominating unto today the thought and life of the people, even more than his great compeers have done in other parts of India. Through his *Kirtana* which grips the heart of Sri Krishna's devotees and his vast poetic production which opened a great chapter in Assam's literary history, does Assam speak in pathos and in prayer. Assam also speaks, as does India, through the voices heard in the places of worship of every other faith. And Assam speaks in her freshest, choicest and most vibrant voice through the heroism of her numerous sons and daughters who shared with the nation the trials, tribulations, sufferings and sacrifices which cut out the road to freedom and who, during the last forty years and more, led the people of Assam in the fight for national liberty patriots like Tarun Ram Phookun, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Hem Chandra Barua, Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi, and their able collaborators living to-day and through the thousands of her young men and women who feel stirred to great deeds for the rebuilding of a free India and who aspire to play their part in the great battle of peace of the present time which, when won, will place the Indian nation in the vanguard of human progress.

In all these myriad voices and yet in concord and symphony does Assam speak.

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## CHAPTER XI

## SRI PRAKASA

[ Sri Sri Prakasa is a household name in Assam. As the Governor of this frontier State, he was in Assam comparatively for a short period—only for about fifteen months (February 1949—1950). During this period, Sri Sri Prakasa was held in high esteem and affection by the people of Assam who did not, in fact, welcome the sudden announcement that he was appointed a Minister to the Central Cabinet. It is no secret that an effort was made to retain Sri Sri Prakasa as the State Governor for some time more; but the effort proved futile, probably New Delhi's call was considered greater than Shillong's. It was, however, found that Sri Sri Prakasa's inclusion in the Central Cabinet was very helpful in various ways. Whenever an occasion arose, he pleaded vigorously for Assam. Even now that attitude to, and interest in, Assam are with him, for he speaks about Assam as though he is one of the people of the State.]

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## INDIA'S EASTERN FRONTIER

By SRI PRAKASA

How few of us, educated men and women, know anything about Assam—and among those who know so little about this fair State, one is inclined to include the Assamese themselves.

It is curious—but it is a fact—that Assam has played little part in our thoughts. It has nestled quietly in its native hills and dales, and has neither cared to advertise itself nor have any others worried to do so for it. Vaguely we may have heard of the earthquakes that are common and the snakes that abound in Assam; we may have even heard of the rhinoceros and the elephant, of the tiger and the buffalo. We have vaguely known of the head-hunting Naga and the European tea planter but not many even among those who have actively interested themselves in the country's politics and fought for the country's freedom, have felt any call towards its simple people and its difficult problems. Today when the North Western Frontier that so gripped the imagination and so monopolised the resources of the land through the centuries, has been torn away from us, to become a part of a new-found, separate, independent Dominion, we have been compelled suddenly to realize that we have still another frontier that we can neglect only at our peril; and that, in its turn, is in the North-East. Assam therefore has suddenly sprung into prominence even in the minds of those who have so far been indifferent to its very existence.

And still when we come to think of it, Assam was *not* entirely unknown. In fact, it was very well-known to all those who realized its value for their own behoof, for it is indeed strange that Assam's present economy owes

so little to the Assamese themselves, while persons from far and near have gone to dominate its life in every sphere—religious, political and economic. The British discovered, over a hundred years ago, the possibilities of growing tea, the experiment that was started at Chabua—(Cha-bua: tea sown)—the place where tea was first planted, has put Assam into the picture of the world as a supplier of a most pleasing beverage, bringing comfort to the world and prosperity to the countryside. The British also discovered coal and oil; and Margerita and Digboi are equally well-known as suppliers of these essentials that keep the wheels of modern civilization constantly moving.

American, Norwegian, Welsh, Spanish and Italian missionaries, impelled by an irresistible call, have come here in large numbers; and men and women have settled in dangerous and inaccessible places in the mountains and the forests, to spread their gospel; to heal the suffering; to educate the ignorant. Then the people of Marwar have gone there; and in their hands entirely is the internal trade of the place. They are found settled in what still are dangerous places in the interior of the hills and while they doubtless make their own profits the credit cannot be denied them that they also supply salt and cloth and sugar, which they obtain with much difficulty, to people who otherwise would not have known these necessary articles of daily use.

Practically the whole of the labour on the tea estates, in the factories and on the roads, comes from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The administrative set-up largely consists of persons recruited from Bengal. The army and the police are monopolized by the Gurkha; skilled work is in the hands of the Punjabi; and river traffic in those of the East Pakistani.

The Assamese proper, divided between the hills and the dales, is a simple agriculturist who weaves his own cloth and grows his own food. He is a proud and

sensitive person wedded to tradition and glorying in his history, his legend and his isolation. The women know both the domestic arts of spinning and weaving and the fine arts of dancing and singing. Wrapped in a mantle of modesty that so becomes them, they go about their work with free and assured steps that truly makes them the ideal representative of their sex.

The plains consist of the remnants of many migrations from the east and the west—the Ahoms, the Boro Kacharis and numerous influential men and women that went from Kanauj in U.P. In the hills innumerable tribes lie scattered unknown, passing their colourful existence, indifferent to the rest of the world. The Khasis, the Nagas and the Mizos; the Abors, the Miris and the Mishmis—with their many sub-sections—are all there; and just beyond where they live, stretches our vulnerable frontier for about 800 miles in the north abutting Tibet and another 800 in the east contiguous to Burma; and now with Pakistan as a separate Dominion, another 600 miles to the west alongside that country. Assam is joined to India by a narrow corridor of a bare forty miles through the territory of what was known till the other day as the Indian State of Cooch Behar.

The very presentation of the picture in this form will show that the place is bristling with problems. There is the problem of defence from possible aggression from outside; there is the problem of keeping perpetual touch with the rest of India, despite the extreme narrowness of the strip that connects Assam with it. There is the problem of bringing out the State from its isolation and making it a living part of the country, sharing in a common life and pulsating with a common hope. There is the problem of utilising its undeveloped natural resources, turning its beauty spots into health resorts, and giving wealth-producing industries to make it rich and strong.

There is then the problem of uniting the inhabitants of the plains with the denizens of the hills so that

among themselves they may feel one despite the obvious differences of race, language and culture that they variously represent, and despite all political and other considerations that have kept them apart, each from each, through the centuries past. Above all is the problem of making the people realize their responsibilities and possibilities, and helping them to stand on their own feet and fulfil their duties in the service of the State and society.

How are the difficulties to be resolved? It is here that Assam calls for the spontaneous service of the rest of the land—service that could be based on self-sacrifice and self-effacement, and not merely the service which is rendered for possible material profit. The latter type of service has been rendered by all those who have gone to the State and utilized its resources in one way or another. Suspicion having been aroused among the people by various circumstances and ideologies which it would serve no useful purpose to discuss here, that this service is mere exploitation, a vague sense of bitterness has come in their hearts. Fear, jealousy, anger, alternated by a sense of helplessness and frustration, are resulting in various complexes that make neither for happiness nor safety. Even though they do not know how to make themselves suddenly fit to carry the world's burden, they are expressing in many ways their irritation with those who have come to them even if these might have rendered real service—despite their own undeniable profits—to the people at large in building up the social and the economic life of the State.

The first type of service has also been rendered; and that is practically entirely by the European and the American missionaries. In the pursuit of their ideal, they have effaced themselves completely; and in the most distant places, one sees men and women from far-off countries coming and settling down in a spirit of pure service and giving their best to the people among whom they live. They answer in their daily life and work the

call that there is in their hearts. How affectionately these foreign Christian men and women look after the suffering leper, what pains they take to teach those who are ignorant of all that does not immediately concern them, cannot really be envisaged and realized by anyone unless he sees the work of these good men and true at close quarters.

But their great work suffers because it is a fact that their main urge is to give a foreign religious faith to the simple people; and in Assam the Christian religion which these missionaries have brought has stood not only for a change in the social and intellectual habits of life and thought, but has also, unfortunately, in its effects, made for political alignments of an almost anti-national nature. Christian influence has been so wide-spread that quite 20 percent of the Nagas, 40 percent of the Khasis and 70 percent of the Mizos (Lushais) are Christians to-day, and they present problems of their own vis-a-vis the rest of their own people as well as the State and the country as a whole in the present set-up of Swaraj.

Whatever the position may be, we are bound to pay a tribute of respectful admiration and grateful appreciation to those who, voluntarily cutting themselves away from their homes and all that men holds dear, have come to these distant hills to spread the truth as they see it and to help an alien people in the way they think best for them.

They have also shown their great spirit of service by the courageous and wonderful results they have achieved. They have also taught us the methods by which we can make ourselves useful to the people they have served. It is time that the rest of the land—and the most stout-hearted and the best-equipped men and women living therein—made up their minds to do something for this fair State in our north-east frontier in the spirit of the true missionary; and we have to take the light of knowledge and give the joy of health to the

people who live there, by establishing our own schools and running our own dispensaries.

We can do this only if we follow the methods of the Christian missionary who with his happy married life and an assured minimum of creature comforts, is able to fulfil his ideal of religious and social aspiration and spend himself cheerfully in the service of the less blessed of his kind. I know that our task becomes specially difficult as our inspiration has to be secular, while it is well known that religious faith gives a fervour all its own and can make man do wonders. Sheer secular aspiration does not take man so far as the other does.

The Government have been doing their very best to work in their own way what the missionaries have done in theirs. Governments have failed despite their vast resources while the missionaries have succeeded with their limited means. This is all due to the differing spirit that underlies the work of the servants of God and the servants of the State. The former works for love; the latter for his prospects. The former takes initiative as circumstances require, the latter is bound by red-tape, by endless rules and regulations. The service of this frontier province with its complicated problems, can therefore best be rendered by non-official agencies, free from the trammels of Governmental regulations, and doing their work impelled by their own inner call to put forth their very best.

There are not wanting persons with such aspirations in the land. What however is wanting is the assurance of happiness that is found in the comradeship of husband and wife working in a common cause with mutual sympathy and understanding. The happiness of the missionary's married life has always greatly struck me: and I ascribe much of their success in their endeavours to the domestic felicity that gives inner contentment and spiritual bliss.

What also is wanting, are the voluntary institutions which would ensure their workers the minimum of creature requirements throughout life in conformity with the demands of human nature and a fair assurance of material comfort. It is no use idealizing too much where the planning of human life is concerned. All extremes are to be sedulously avoided. We must not expect too much from human nature. Our service organizations have failed because of their inability to maintain a balance between the real and the ideal on the basis of the natural urges, incentives, desires and needs of man. The missionary has made a truly wonderful compromise, and his methods are worth imitating and emulating if we also want to do what he has done.

Assam's needs are great. She can easily prove a danger zone. Assam's problems have to be tackled urgently and her requirements met with alacrity and expedition. Governments both of the State and the Centre have helped. They will no doubt continue helping: but the requisite men and women have got to be found to undertake tasks of high endeavour in an independent non-official capacity. Government may raise buildings for schools and hospitals, but if there are no men to put these to proper use, they are of little purpose. I know these things are happening in Assam; and for want of proper men and women, much investment in buildings is lying fallow.

Besides education and medication, the great need of all neglected tracts of the world is communication; but even roads and bridges are constructed by men for men; and if there are no men to utilize them, they also remain unused and forgotten. The eternal cry is for men—genuine men and women and not mere human forms which abound in the world here, there and everywhere.

Governments certainly cannot find the proper men with the proper qualities of heart which alone can impel

them to work in inhospitable places among strange people with the sole incentive of helping their kind. Governments can and do find men of knowledge with the proper qualities of head; but such men do not find the fulfilment of their ambition when away from the limelight and so can, and do, discover a thousand excuses for not going to places where they can at best receive only the approbation of their hearts, and where their services may never be mentioned in despatches.

My one great hope is that as Assam's call is heard more and more in the outside world and as her importance is increasingly recognized, her needs will not go unheeded, and men and women will be found who will rush to her service and help her to come to her own. And the reward will be great and very much worth having. For Nature has lavished her very best on Assam; its mountains and streams, its forests and fields, its flora and fauna all grip the heart. The very sight of Assam gives delight to the eye; and the service of Assam will ever be a source of real joy to the soul of every man and every woman that gives it.

## CHAPTER XII

DR. PATTABHI SITARAMAYYA

[Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya is one of the "Old Guards" of the Congress. Unlike other top leaders, his association with Assam has been anything but intimate. But it would be fair to say that he is not totally ignorant of Assam. This fact is borne out by the chapter in his well-known book, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, where he has given a graphic description of the Gauhati session of the Congress held in 1926. He attended the session. Since then he has not visited Assam, not unfortunately even during the tenure of his Presidentship of the Congress. Regarded as the most competent chronicler of the Congress movement since its very inception, Dr. Sitaramayya's few lines on the Gauhati session of the Congress should appear to be the only available authoritative account, and ought to prove interesting.]

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## A LAND OF ELEPHANTS

BY PATTABHI SITARAMAYYA

The Gauhati session met under a certain tension of feeling. The tension was caused by the warfare between Co-operation and Non-cooperation. It will be remembered that Non-cooperation stood for continuous, constant and uniform obstruction. Later, it became a statement of policy to be pursued only if the Swarajists came in a majority. Gradually, it came perilously near co-operation, what with acceptance of elected seats on Legislative Committees and of nominated seats on Government of India Committees. Finally, it hovered on the borderland of co-operation at Sabarmati where it was just fighting shy of it. The Council Party was willing to negotiate but afraid to accept. Then there was the spirit of co-operation in the Swaraj Party itself which would not straightway take up the position, say of the Nationalists, the Independents, or the Liberals, but coquet with the idea, speaking of Responsive Co-operation, honourable co-operation, co-operation if possible and obstruction if necessary, and co-operation for all that the Reforms were worth. It was these subtle but thoroughly practical questions that created the tension of feeling at *Pragjyotishapura* (Gauhati). Added to this, there was Government throwing out baits in the form of open praises and veiled invitations, and indulging in all those blandishments and arts by which wavering minds and timid hearts are won over.

This tension, sufficiently trying in itself but by no means tragic, was aggravated at Gauhati by the sudden news that Swami Shraddhananda had been shot in his sick bed by a certain Muslim who had sought and obtained an interview with him. The news was received

at Gauhati on the day of the elephant procession of the President. Assam, the land of elephants, was anxious to give a remarkable and unprecedented ovation to the President of the Congress, but the procession had necessarily to be abandoned. Gloom overhung the session. Hindus and Muslims felt the deepest grief over the tragedy. The usual formalities initiated the sittings of the Congress Session. The unsophisticated music of the tribal men of Assam added a romantic note to the natural romance of the country known to our *Itihasas* as Kamarupa. Gandhi was given quarters in a small hut on the banks of the Brahmaputra, the camp and Mandap being a bit removed from his lodging.

When Mr. Srinivasa delivered his Address, there was none of the unexpected element in his pronouncement, his views having been well-known beforehand. After paying a well-merited tribute to the memory of Swami Shraddhananda and referring in suitable terms to the melancholy death of Omar Sobani, some time Congress treasurer, he dealt with the Elections, and stated how the results had justified the policy of the Swaraj Party in the Legislatures. The Provinces of Madras, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in a striking degree, and the other Provinces including the Punjab to a lesser extent, he said, had responded to the Congress mandate and come under the Congress discipline. Dyarchy was then dissected and anatomized, the dry bones of the Central Government were exposed in the valley of the shadow of despotism. Deshbandhu's offer was recalled, India's status was examined, Army and Navy were dealt with, the Council programme was discussed. "Resistance to every activity, governmental or other, that may impede that Nation's progress towards Swaraj" was the basic principle laid down at Cawnpore on which the particular duties of Congressmen in Councils were to be framed. He condemned acceptance of office in unequivocal terms and with a logic that was unassailable. But at the same time he valued the position of

the Swaraj Party as forming the "Opposition whose power, though indirect, is very real and much more effective than the power of Ministers and if we are disciplined and energetic and in sufficient numbers in any council, we can carry out our policy and programme more easily than the Ministers". There is a veiled sarcasm in the statement which implied that the Ministers have no power whatever. Then he dealt with the burning topics of the day, namely, currency and communalism and the cold topics of the hour such as khaddar, untouchability and prohibition, and put in a strong plea for tolerance and unity and closed with the following peroration :

"Swaraj is not an intellectual but an emotional proposition. We must cherish it in our hearts with unquenchable faith. Neither genial humour nor mordant sarcasm, neither the persuasion of friends nor the wrath of foes, neither appreciation nor calumny, should make our patriotism tepid or the singleness of our purpose qualified".

The resolutions of Gauhati are of the usual type. The resolution on the late Swami Shraddhananda was moved, as was to be expected, by Gandhi and seconded by Mahomed Ali. Gandhi expounded what true religion was and explained the causes that led to the murder. "Now you will perhaps understand why I have called Abdul Rashid a brother and I repeat it. I do not even regard him as guilty of Swami's murder. Guilty indeed are those who excited feelings of hatred against one another." Kenya figured next on the list of resolutions. There, restrictive legislation against the Indian settlers became more and more progressive, the original poll-tax of 20s. which by currency manipulation was raised to 30s. had been raised to 50s. by legislation, thus conserving European interests against Indian interests, liberty and aspirations. On the question of work in Councils, it was definitely laid down that Congressmen shall:

(a) Refuse to accept Ministership or other offices in the gift of the Government and oppose the formation of a Ministry by other parties until, in the opinion of the Congress of the All India Congress Committee, a satisfactory response is made by the Government to the National Demand;

(b) subject to clause (d), refuse supplies and throw out budgets until such response is made by the Government or unless otherwise directed by the All India Congress Committee;

(c) throw out all proposals for legislative enactment by which the bureaucracy proposes to consolidate its powers;

(d) move resolutions and introduce and support measures and Bills which are necessary for the healthy growth of National life and the advancement of the economic, agricultural, industrial and commercial interests, of the country, and for the protection of the freedom of person, speech, association and of the Press, and the consequent displacement of the bureaucracy;

(e) take steps to improve the condition of agricultural tenants by introducing and supporting measures to secure fixity of tenure and other advantages with a view to ensure a speedy amelioration of the condition of the tenants; and

(f) generally, protect the rights of Labour, agricultural and industrial, and adjust on an equitable basis the relations between landlords and tenants, capitalists and workmen.

The policy of invoking emergency legislation for dealing with the Bengal detenus was condemned; work in and outside the country, Hindu-Muslim unity, Gurudwara prisoners, and currency were the subjects of suitable resolutions. The venue of the next session of the Congress was left to be decided by the A.I.C.C.

A few interesting points relating to the Congress have to be noted here. Two professors of Zurich were there, deeply interested in an old Coat of Arms that formed one of the exhibits in the Exhibition. They had a smattering of English, and when asked how they happened to pick it up, said, "Oh, we learn it: we have to learn much as you". Mr. and Mrs. Pethick Lawrence were there. The former was a bit hard of hearing; the latter was perhaps the more intelligent of the two. To them, it was a discovery to be told that India's slavery was not merely political, but economic and commercial as well. Gandhi was here too; he was not a passive spectator. He took an active part in the deliberations, so much so that two resolutions actually passed by the Subjects Committee had to be reversed the next day. One of them related to Nabha and other to currency. Gandhi has never sympathised with Nabha's lot to the extent of committing the Congress to a particular position on it. A third resolution on Independence was simply smothered and scorched under the fire of Gandhi's eloquence.

Motilal made a statement on the subject of Nabha. He said at that particular moment he had been briefed by the Maharaja and could not, therefore, commit himself to a speech at a public meeting on a matter in which he was briefed. Norottam Morarji and certain economists were there at Gauhati, for the obvious reason that the question of currency and exchange was to be dealt with. Neither Mr. Jayakar nor Mr. Kelkar was present. For one thing, both were ill at the time. For another, the Responsivists by this time definitely cut themselves off from the Congress. Gauhati laid emphasis on work in the villages and made the habitual wear of khaddar compulsory, to enable Congressmen "to vote at the election of representatives of delegates or any Committee or Sub-Committee of any Congress organization whatsoever, or to be elected as such, or to take part in any meeting of the Congress or Congress

organization of any Committee or Sub-Committee thereof". We take leave of the Gauhati Congress and the charming country of Kamrupa, while despite the Mongoloid features of the people that inhabit it, worships the same gods and goddesses as the Hindus in the rest of India, and observes the same manners and customs and cherishes the same culture. We were shown the Kamakhya temple, the Umananda that is enthroned on the height of a rock in the midst of the Brahmaputra and the Vasistha Ashram about 13 miles from Gauhati.

From the meditation of these gods and goddesses, let us descent to matters of the earth, earthy. The President of the Gauhati Congress had made a casual reference to the election of the Swarajists at the election of 1926. Their election programme had been carefully drawn up. Madras gave a glorious account of itself and Government acknowledged it. U.P. fared badly and, to use Pandit Motilalji's language:

"There has been a veritable rout of the Swarajists. 'Defeat' is no word for it. But this was not because they were Swarajists, but because they were Nationalists. The political programmes of the various parties had nothing to do with the elections. It was a fight between the forces of Nationalism and those of a low order of Communalism reinforced by wealth, wholesale corruption, terrorism and falsehood. 'Religion in danger' was the cry of the opponents of the Congress, both Hindu and Muslim. I have been freely denounced as a beef-eater and destroyer of cows, the supporter of the prohibition of music before mosques, and the one man responsible for the stoppage of Ramlila processions in Allahabad. I could only contradict these lies in public meetings, but they penetrated hamlets and villages which I could not reach. Staying in Dak and In-

pection Bungalows, and eating food cooked in European style, was taken to confirm the lying propaganda".

The history of the Congress has by this time become a monotonous tale of pious resolutions at the annual sessions and perpetual strifes in the Councils. There was, however, one redeeming feature brought into greater prominence than ever before. Since the formation of the A.I.S.A. khaddar had a pure atmosphere of village uplift and economics. Men and women wedded to it were strenuously labouring in its cause without any excitement of votes and the sensations of lobbies. The annual exhibitions showed how splendid was the development of the craft. At Gauhati, the comparative progress of six or seven years which Bihar had been able to effect in the production of khaddar was an object lesson to the whole of India. 'Kokti' of Bihar and Chicacole muslin of Andhra were glorious, but the glory is not of modern revival. The ancient craft has been there in all its splendour. Even so were the 'endi' and 'muga' silks of Assam which were being greatly helped by the Assam Government. The points of progress did not merely concern the fineness of the counts, but the tension of the yarn and its twist on which the durability of cloth depends. But the most remarkable feature was that, in each Province, the hidden talents of the artisans and craftsmen of the collateral crafts came to be revived once again, and the skilled workmen who were driven out of their homes and hearths and became common, mechanical labourers, were restored to their traditional professions. They have brought art and beauty to khaddar. Old blocks have been recovered, new designs are being invented. The printing and dyeing industry is really the right hand of the textile industry, and when the spinner and the weaver have been resuscitated they have brought to life, with them, the printer and the dyer, the dhobie, the bleacher, the engraver and the petty trader. The exhibi-

bitions which have become adjunct of the Congress and which, except in one or two years, are exclusively of khaddar,—so far as the textile industry is concerned,—have helped to concentrate interest upon the economic rehabilitation of the country, side by side with the political, social and cultural, and have convinced the people that Swaraj means food and raiment to the poor.\*

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## CHAPTER XIII

**KAKASAHEB KALELKAR**

[The late Sri Thakkar Bapa and Sri Kakasaheb Kalelkar are two household names in Assam, as throughout India. While Thakkar Bapa's main interest was in the welfare of the harijans and the backward people, Kakasaheb's interest largely centres round propagation of the Rastrabhasa. Both were Gandhiji's great lieutenants in the sphere of constructive work. They came in close contact with Assam at Gandhiji's bidding. For Assam has offered a fairly wide scope for constructive work in reference to the uplift of the tribes, the harijans, and also the spread of the Rastrabhasa. Therefore, it is far from exaggeration to say that Kakasaheb has known Assam and her people intimately through his association with the State and her leaders for over fifteen years. In fact, his interest in the development of Assam even overstepped the usually prescribed limit of language and the study of the tribal problems. This was proved by his active participation with the Gauhati University activities at the initial stage. Kakasaheb, on that score, speaks on Assam with an air of authority, and maintains close touch with Assam specially through that band of workers who have devoted to constructive works.]

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\*From *The History of the Indian National Congress.*

## AS I KNOW ASSAM

By KAKASAHEB KALELKAR

I must confess that my first interest in Assam was purely political. Under the British rule we were not allowed to reach our North-Western Frontier. By we I mean the known revolutionaries of our times. I always felt therefore that I must see at least the North-East Frontier. The stories of the magic of Kamrup never interested me. I could not believe them even as a child.

Temperamentally I have a fascination for whatever is distant or neglected. The very fact that Assam was rarely mentioned in the newspapers created in me a longing to see this distant corner of India. As a student, I felt that I must see Kashmir, Kamrup and Cape Comorine,—the three corners of India. I regarded the shape of my country as resembling the sacred triangle of the *tantric* worshippers.

But it was in the year 1927, immediately after the Gauhati Congress session, that I decided that I must see Assam. It happened this way: Mahatmaji in his letter to the Ashram sisters wrote of the beauty of the Congress camp on the banks of the Brahmaputra, and added that the *Assamiya* huts are so elegant that Kaka would simply love to come and stay there. In a post-prayer sermon in the Ashram, Gandhiji repeated that the natural scenery of Assam is sure to attract the artistic sense of Kaka.

It was only when I left Gujarat and took up the cause of the national language of India that I got an opportunity of going to Assam. At Haripura Congress, I sought out delegates from Assam. I met Dr. Harekrishna Das, his noble wife and their charming daughters.

I told them that I should be going to Assam with Baba Raghavdas. They gave me their address and extended a warm invitation. I have been to Assam so many times since then, but Dr. Harekrishna Das has been my host at Gauhati ever since; and I have been impressed more and more by his high standard of public life and morality. He is outspoken in his views. He is prepared to call spade a spade. But I never discovered any trait of pettiness or bitterness in him. It was a joy to join him in his morning prayers and hear him sing the songs of Gurudeo Rabindranath Tagore. My secretary, Kumari Sarojini Nanavati, and myself decided that Dr. Das is the prototype of Tagore's Paresh Babu in his famous novel "Gora".

I may be said to have seen a pretty good portion of Assam. The sight of the majestic river Brahmaputra from the heights of the Kamakhya hill is an experience one would not forget in a life's time. The wide expanse of the same river at Dibrugarh defies description. In my book *Lokmata* I have borrowed a phrase from the poet Valmiki and called the rivers of India as so many mothers of the people. But when I saw the havoc wrought by the Brahmaputra, near Dibrugarh and Sadiya, I was driven to say that Brahmaputra was not mother, she was a goddess meting out both life and death with equal indifference.

I have always felt that geographers and poets ought to have vied with each other in describing the poetry and grandeur of the fan-like expanse of many rivers round about Sadiya, Bihine, Lohit, Tarangika, Dibang, Dihang, Subansiri, Bharoli, Baroi, and many others, too numerous to mention. They are so many Goddesses playing with the fate of Man! Barpeta, Nalbari, Gauhati, Nowgong, Tezpur, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sadiya, Nizamghat, Pasighat, Ledo, Margherita, Shillong, Silchar, Sylhet, Cherrapunji, Kohima, Imphal, Lumding, Golaghat—what a galaxy of places each having a characteristic of its own!

When I went to Assam, I made it a rule not to be guest of my Marwari friends who have settled there, but of the Assamiya people themselves. I knew that a strict vegetarian like me could not be a convenient guest, and yet this very insistence enabled me to experience more fully the charm of Assamiya hospitality. The Assamiya ladies weave their own cloth in their own houses, on primitive looms. It is a pleasure to see them receiving you in their houses dressed in the artistic silken garments of their own manufacture. Life in Assam is what nature has allowed man to develop. The people there may be peaceful but nature is not. Assam lies in a corner where the Himalayan ranges terminate and the Burmese Yomas meet them at right angle. The whole area is made up of the knotty hills and mountain ranges, and their weird shape is the result of volcanic eruptions. Earthquakes in Assam are a frequent phenomenon and the mighty river Brahmaputra with his loyal tributaries, responds to these periodical cataclysmic changes. The people are so used to these changes and damages that they refer to these natural calamities with Japanese stoicism. When I visited Dibrugarh a second or third time, I was asked to see the house from which I had first enjoyed the sight of the expanse of the Brahmaputra. They said that not only the house and the street were washed away by the river but two more adjacent streets also followed suit within a few years. Another friend of mine casually remarked that he was not thinking of repairing his house because he was sure that the house would take *Jalasamadhi* (watery grave) within a year or two.

I feel that there is a great future before Assam. It is situated between three countries, Cheena-desh, Bharat-desh, and Brahma-desh. Its long history is a story of racial adjustments, and what is more, a perpetual adjustment to the cataclysmic vagaries of nature. The life of the primitive tribes there is perhaps unique in the whole world. But even these tribes are soon

going to assimilate the best that is in Indian culture and modernize themselves. I would not be surprised if they figure largely in the defence of the country. The Ahoms are a virile race and have kept up their strength inspite of the unfavourable climate and malaria. Trade and war have brought to Assam people of various communities and nationalities.

The rich forests, the turbulent rivers and the majestic mountains will prove to the Assamiya people their greatest sources both for inspirations and opportunity.

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## CHAPTER XIV

SYGRID HYDARI

[ During her short stay in Assam as the wife of a distinguished person, the late Sir Akbar Hydari, who was Assam's Governor at the transitional period from 1947-48, Sygrid Hydari had ample opportunity to know Assam, the tribal womenfolk in particular. It is doubtless sad that Assam lost prematurely one of the ablest administrators in the death of Sir Akbar Hydari, whose musings on Assam, her problems, and her people would have been most fascinating and instructive, had not the icy hand of death fallen on him while he was on a shikar excursion at an outlying place in Manipur in December 1948. But one may find consolation in the fact that his wife, Sygrid Hydari is there to tell something of Assam ]

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## THE ASSAMESE — A BORN ARISTOCRAT

By SYGRID HYDARI

At a party a friend remarked that I seem to have spent most of my life on frontiers, an observation which, on reflections, I find to be literally true.

I was born in a frontier tract, with Russia on one side and Norway on the other and have many happy recollections of the nomadic tribes who moved to and fro in that area. Since then I have lived on many frontiers, but the one that is most vividly silhouetted in my mind is the North-Eastern Frontier of India, where we spent twenty happy months.

I feel about Assam much as Mrs. Indira Gandhi is reported to have felt, on a visit to East Ladakh, "this is where I should like to live when I am old".

One day I hope to write, in some detail, about people and events of those days but not just yet. My perspective is still in need of adjustment.

Some personalities appear to be more than life size, others are receding, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Time will adjust their proportions and in the meantime, like Jack Horner, I will put in a thumb, to pull out a plum or two for you.

The beauty of Assam's scenery appealed to some deeply rooted instinct in us. The most noticeable thing about the landscape was an immense green stillness. In daytime the jungle stood dark and remote; at night, when the moon lay speared on some tall pine, it shone with an opaline lustre.

How we enjoyed travelling on Assam's mountain roads, pitted in the rains like some crazy moon-scape!

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

After a spell of hard work we spent our "otium" steaming up the Brahmaputra,—an ordinary river this as we were amazed to discover, but a banked up ocean, with large islands sprawling heavily in her midst.

In Assam we found our magic "Xanadu", but much as her scenery refreshed and delighted us, it was the people who earned our liveliest merry.

The Assamese possesses, in my eyes, the virtue and defects of the born aristocrat. His natural dignity rarely deserts him in any crisis, big or small. He will not bestir himself unduly for the sake of added lucre. An "elegant sufficiency" is his motto. The lessons which some of us learn in anguish of the spirit come naturally to him; to be humble, to find stillness in the core of our being, "to be silent, content in our little corner that is the secret of life".

We found the Assamese courteous and friendly on approach, but he did not intrude himself. He always showed his respect in silence, not by shouting and hand waving.

It seemed a little strange at first that the Capital should not be in the heart of the province, though there are good reasons for not having it moved elsewhere. Like a clockwork toy, Shillong fascinated us at first but pulled a little after a few windings. The social dough here, as in many other hill stations, is apt to be of the unrising variety.

The real life of the capital centres round the hard-working and self-contained Khasis. In the weekly market we discovered all sorts of fascinating things, including queer animal which looked like a cross between a panda and a hedgehog. It grew to enormous dimensions and turned out to be a racoon.

Soon after our arrival in Shillong we paid an impromptu visit to a nice little tea shop in a Khasi vil-

## THE ASSAMESE—A BORN ARISTOCRAT

lage. The young girl who served us astonished us by plunging her tea cups in a bucket of boiling water, before filling them. On the wall we found pinned up pictures of The Good Shepherd, Gandhiji, King V and a newspaper photograph of my husband, who was delighted to find himself in such distinguished company.

It was amongst the hillmen that we found our real "Xanadu". A case of atavism with my husband, I imagine. As for me, as Puck says: "Those things do most please me that befall preposterously".

Over a tankard of "zu" or round the camp fire we found that many problems settled themselves.

Far be it from me to subscribe to Rousseau's ideal of "the noble savage". The tribesman, contrary to popular belief, is not a savage, and he is neither more nor less "noble" than ourselves. He possesses, however, many qualities that have been overlaid in our civilized state.

As Freya Stark says: the hillman looks "instinctively" for real values. "It is not", she continues, "the turbulence of the tribesmen that we admire but the virtues that go with the turbulence, so that the two are associated together. His treasure is the freedom of his spirit; when he loses that, he loses everything".

I always knew that I should return to Assam again and-D.V. again. Last year the first opportunity occurred for my children and myself to visit Manipur and Shillong. Our stay amongst the Tankul Nagas confirmed many previous impressions of Naga characteristics.

They suffer from none of the uncertainty that cripples the minds of our modern youth. Their self-reliance showed itself in the way they managed their own church and educational activities, through their Christian Association. The foreign missionary was no longer the Pooh Bah of Ukhru. He had apparently a

good sense to encourage an independent outlook and had now, it seemed to me, constituted himself as a kind of rector of his parish. The judicature is still, except for murder cases, in the hands of the panchayats.

The force of scepticism was little known to these people, their simple reasoning admits no quibbling, either legal or commercial and they are driven by a conscious faith in the given pledge.

I saw nothing of the kind of national ambition that embitters relations between a man and his neighbour.

That tribal society contains a germ of survival was witnessed by the manner in which the sons of the chiefs had met the challenge of democracy. Far from popular movements they have put themselves in the forefront, thus providing their people with intelligent leadership.

Nature still maintains the balance between population and food supply and, as there is no pressure on population, war technique has remained archaic.

The Naga's sense of humour is proverbial. As we were walking along the streets of the modern town, in the company of our Tangkul friends, one of them, still wearing his hair with the traditional tuft swinging from the crown of his head, pointed with a grin to the sign-boards enroute: "Blue Heaven"—we read on one of them, adorned with magnificent star. Others bore inscriptions like "Cleveland Square", "Melody Hall", and "The Unhanging Gardens". This last marked the house where we were bidden to lunch. We all played cricket in the Unhanging Garden with sticks and an empty cigarette tin and, feast, as delicious as it was sumptuous.

In the old village the pagan chief and his Christian sons lived amicably together in the traditional Naga homestead.

The war came to Ukhrul, as it did to Kohima, with this difference that on the former front it was less publicised. There was no British Division stationed in Shangsa, nor did the Tangkuls have a devoted Deputy Commissioner like Mr. Pawsey to spread their fame. Little is, therefore, known, outside army circles, about the part played by Tangkul guerillas during the month that Ukhrul was held by the Japanese.

Together with several platoons of the Assam Rifles these tribals formed the nucleus of V-Force, yielding to none in bravery and discipline. Here, as in Kohima, they did valuable work as scouts and behind the lines.

In all countries there is a wide difference of outlook between hills and plains folk. If they are to live happily side by side a synthesis must be found, but the gap cannot be bridged by hasty or haphazard methods. Yet speed is essential if the situation is not to turn sour. It should be possible, now that social anthropology has come to stay, to find a suitable *modus operandi*. One hopes that this branch of science will find favour, not only in the matter of tribal research but also in the specialized training of the future administrators in tribal areas.

Much will depend on the personal approach. The Nagas, in particular, are quick at spotting any sign of condescension and are merciless in their baiting of the offender.

It is interesting to speculate what will be the effect on the mission-educated young hillmen, of the Central Government's latest proposal in the interest of tribal culture. Many of them seem to have set their face against their old customs, good and bad. Yet their co-operation is needed, if the experiment is to succeed.

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

It would be impossible to review, in however short a space, any recollections of Assam, without recurring references to my dear husband.

He was the centre of our world, from him we drew our inspiration. For him we worked to the best of our abilities, well knowing that he himself worked harder than any of us.

"His mind had no horizon and his sympathy had no warp."

A Chinese proverb says that "when riding a tiger it is difficult to dismount."

Those were turbulent days, when we still suffered from the aftermath of the Japanese invasion.

My husband rode his tiger with unfailing disregard for himself and, though the dismounting proved difficult, the tiger was given no opportunity to make a meal of him. The only charm he wore was his personal integrity. It shone forth like a beacon exposing the traducer, as nothing else could. His invariable good humour disarmed much opposition and preserved the sweetness of any argument.

He often knew in his heart that he was ploughing the sands, yet plough he must, as long as he saw a chance that a table of grass might sprout in time or else resign; for him there was no other alternative.

Money had always been scarce in Assam, but in New Delhi lived the hen that laid golden eggs, and every time he climbed his beanstalk to visit the giants, he managed, in the words of Sardar Patel, to bring something home for Assam in his "portla."

Often the gilt gingerbread of his life had to be paid for in weariness and sickness. Nevertheless those were happy days for him as for me.

In a country where gentle Jesus shares the honours with Buddha and Vedantism, Mahomed and the Forces of Nature, to mention only some of its main founts, religion is bound to set up barriers, but these were less formidable in Assam than in many other parts of India.

Culturally there seemed to be no serious rift in those days and we were often surprised to find, if not a common purpose as yet, at least much friendly co-operation between the communities.

Army and civilians were on very good terms, a matter of some importance in a frontier province.

My husband led the way in this, as in so many directions, and thanks to him, a fire was lit that will not go out as long as anybody will carry a stick or a straw to feed it.

It was my husband's destiny to leave us bereft in the midst of high endeavour, but neither personal disaster nor contentious thought will ever rob me of the conviction that the sacrifice was not in vain.

His beloved Riflemen were always nearest his heart, perhaps because of a strong feeling that their need was the most immediate and urgent.

As usual he went all out to achieve quick results and was happy to know that he had succeeded in the purpose.

Until the history of the Assam Rifles is written, as I hope it will be one day, India will know little how much she owes to this splendid corps for the safety of her north-eastern frontier, but also for the contribution these men have made in many emergencies.

## CHAPTER XV

VERRIER ELWIN

[ Dr. Verrier Elwin, M.A., D.Sc., of Merton College, Oxford, is a well-known anthropologist. India attracts him greatly because this great sub-continent consists of a large medley of races and tribes spread all over the country. The fact that India provides more than ample materials for the study of Man, probably induced Dr. Elwin to settle down in a remote aboriginal village in Madhya Pradesh several years ago. Though he had studied the Gonds, the Baigas, the Kurkus in the State of his settlement, or the Bhils, the Dholias, the Thakurs, the Varlis and the Katkaris of western India, Dr. Elwin did not forget the Garos, the Mizos, the Nagas, the Bodos and other tribes scattered in the far-flung areas of this northernmost State. His views on study of aborigines show a flood of informations which are not only illuminating, but remarkably authoritative too, about the origin, customs, manners etc. of these primitive and simple folk who seem to have now come 'first in everybody's regard.' ]

## MY IMPRESSIONS OF ASSAM

BY DR. VERRIER ELWIN

It has said that you know all about a country after staying in it either for a fortnight or for twenty years. I have now lived in India, which is my home and my love, for a quarter of a century, but I feel I know very little about it. On the other hand, I have spent at various times, about four months in Assam, and so naturally I know everything about it. And perhaps it may be of interest to you to have a few impressions from an unconventional traveller about what he has seen of your lovely land.

For I must admit that ever since I have been here I have been a man under an enchantment. As a sort of poet and artist, I have always loved and sought for beauty, and here in Assam I have been intoxicated with the delight of the natural scene, the grace and charm of the people, and also with a certain beauty in human relationships. This may surprise you, but although I have travelled in many countries, I have never found so much courtesy and friendliness in ordinary people, from shop-keepers, from the chap you ask the way on the road, from officials, and above all, from the hill folk, as I have here. Now that tradition of hospitality and friendliness is a great and precious thing, it is unhappily a rare thing in this modern world of competition and rivalry and hurry but you have it and I hope you will never lose it.

One of the things that excited me very much soon after my arrival in Assam was a visit to the Kaziranga Game Reserve. Last year I went to East Africa and there for two months I spent a lot of time in its famous Game

Sanctuaries, and although I had the rather dubious privilege of being chased by an angry maternal hippopotamus, I did not succeed in seeing a single rhino. Yet here in Assam within a couple of hours, I managed to see a dozen rhinos, some of them irritable whom we avoided, one at least a charming old fellow before whom I was able to get down from my elephant and photograph.

But I must confess I was struck by the difference between the Game Sanctuaries of Kenya and Tanganika and yours. In East Africa there is a sort of tradition that everybody should co-operate to make the Sanctuaries a success; a lot of money is spent on them; no one would dream of poaching; and what a wonderful result is achieved. You can see in a brief drive in your car hundreds of giraffe, zebra, ostrich, wild elephant and even lions, wandering about near the roads in perfect confidence that the odd two-legged creature called man was their friend. But I am told that it is not quite the same thing here. The animals are not altogether sure that they are safe; they do not appear so readily; the public does not co-operate in the same way.

And surely there is something wrong in that. After all, most of the East Africans are carnivorous, violent people; here in India we are traditionally wedded to non-violence, and to a real sense of brotherhood with animals. And so I venture to appeal to everybody to buck up the Game Sanctuaries, at Kaziranga and elsewhere, and to make a real success of them. They are something to be proud of; it is a grand thing to see creatures of the wild feeling safe even in civilization!

But of course what I really came to Assam to see and study was the art of the hill people. Now here too you have a real treasure. It astonishes me to find that you have no proper Museum in Shillong or Gauhati.

Do you know, you can see more of the treasures of the Assam tribes in Oxford or Cambridge than you can here?

Art of course is a big word and covers a lot of things. There is the art of works, the art of music, the plastic and graphic art of a country.

Now take the art of works and music. The other day, very tired after a long climb up a most formidable mountain to a Kabul village, I suddenly arrived at a scene of fantastic and unearthly beauty. In a great grove of orange trees some thirty splendid youths, their limbs glowing golden in the setting sun, clad in rich red cloth and having on their heads great white crowns like wings, were marching up and down with spears, and chanting ancient melodies that recalled a long-forgotten world. It was a death chant, and it was one that I should be proud to have sung over my own body when it goes to the dust.

I do not know what were the words which those boys sang. But I feel that someone ought to know. How many books, how many collections have yet been made of the songs and poems of Assam's countryside? These old songs are disappearing—rapidly; the schoolboys prefer jazz music from Hollywood. But before it is too late, will not some scholars take the trouble—and it will mean a great deal of trouble—to record these things? There must also be a vast treasure of folk-tale and myth in the hills of Assam; how much of it has ever been written down?

There is another thing that excited me very much—the carving in wood. The Thangkhuls of Manipur make splendid decorations on their house, so do the Maos and Marams. The Konyaks adorn their morungs; the Angamis make magnificent village gates; the Phoms

## DISCOVERY OF ASSAM

and other tribes are expert in fashioning images and pipes and in decorating drinking mugs or making toys. Some of this is of extraordinary vigour and beauty; we should not let it be lost. Yet in how many educational centres is the art of wood-carving taught and encouraged?

And here is another thing, a wonderful treasure which you have in Assam—the sense of colour. Gandhiji once said that “the maidens of lovely Assam weave poems on their handlooms” and he was right. In the remotest villages, far from what in our conceit we call “civilization”, you may find women producing textiles of such exquisite taste, with such an instinct for tone and colouring as makes the sophisticated feel rather small.

The art of personal decoration is another thing which I have noted among the hill people here. I have some ear-ornaments made by the Kabuls and Kachas from the lovely blue wings of birds; I have rarely seen such delicacy of touch, such natural sense of beauty, such intelligence in adapting things ready to hand. The scintillating wings of beetles too are often used, and natural stones and beans of cowries and flowers; and in their use and in the arrangement of the cloth, nothing ever clashes, nothing is out of focus, nothing is harsh or crude. It is like a symphony of wild flowers where everything matches.

Now I am stressing this because a lot of it is rapidly disappearing and will disappear before the march of progress. But there is no reason why it should. It is false sense of values that prefers the sola topi, a form of head-gear long ago abandoned by Europeans in India, or a parody of western dress to the fine, simple natural attire of yesterday. A discerning critic, Mr. Raymond Mortimer, who found much to praise on a recent visit to India, yet spoke of the bad taste that he